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**THE COUNTRY IN THE WRITINGS**

**OF**

**ELIZABETH GASKELL**

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**Dissertation submitted to the University of Liverpool for the Degree of Master of Arts (The Country and the City) in part fulfilment of the Modular Programme in Literary Studies**

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## ABSTRACT

### The Country in the Writings of Elizabeth Gaskell

The country is an element within all the writings of Elizabeth Gaskell, in her letters, short stories and novels, even the 'condition-of-England' novels set within the city, and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Yet, it is an aspect of her writing which has suffered from relative critical neglect. It is, therefore, an interesting and appropriate choice of subject for a dissertation for the M.A. in Literary Studies: 'The Country and the City'.

The Introduction, after indicating the significance of Gaskell's letters in relation to the country, gives reasons for the selection of the short stories as the basis of the study of Gaskell's depiction of the country, together with the novel, *Sylvia's Lovers*, which is closest in stance and technique to the portrayal of country life in the short stories and also offers an interesting contrast between life in the country and the town. Reference is also made to other texts wherever appropriate. The study is essentially text-based, as a means of examining in depth Gaskell's subtlety as a writer.

The chapter, 'The Country in the Letters', explores the extent to which Gaskell's letters reveal her lifelong love of the countryside and empathy with country people, as well as indicating early literary influences and evidencing many of the techniques found in her fictional writing.

The next chapter, 'The Country in the Short Stories', after discussing the influence of Wordsworth, considers the element of social history within Gaskell's fictionalisation, before turning to the significance of the countryside as setting, the inherent characteristics of country people and realist techniques.

The following chapter, 'The Country and the Town in *Sylvia's Lovers*', after treating the background to the work and certain key elements, analyses Gaskell's use of the country setting, her depiction of the principal country characters and her realist techniques, before considering the contrast between country and town, particularly in relation to Sylvia Robson's life after her marriage.

The final chapter, 'The Country in the Writings of Elizabeth Gaskell: an Overview', summarises the significance of the portrayal of the country in the works studied in detail, while touching upon the difference in perspective in *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*. The chapter concludes that: 'through the breadth of her picture, the acuity of her observation and her engagement, Gaskell's depiction of the countryside and country people is unique in nineteenth century English literature'.

## **DECLARATION**

**The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CP</i>	<i>Cousin Phillis and Other Tales</i>
<i>CT</i>	<i>Curious, if True</i>
<i>DNW</i>	<i>A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories</i>
<i>GL</i>	<i>The Letters of Mrs Gaskell</i>
<i>GSJ</i>	<i>Gaskell Society Journal</i>
<i>GSN</i>	<i>Gaskell Society Notes</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>Gothic Tales</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories</i>
<i>MLL</i>	<i>My Lady Ludlow and Other Stories</i>
<i>SUM</i>	<i>Sartain's Union Magazine</i>

## Introduction

In considering the significance of the country in the writings of Elizabeth Gaskell, the reader is struck by its omnipresence in her writing as a whole: in the letters, the short stories and novels, even the ‘condition-of-England’ novels set within the city, and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, with the swirling moors rising up beyond Haworth. The country, we might say, is never wholly absent from the writing of Gaskell and yet, though it represents a significant element within her work, it is an aspect of it which has suffered from relative critical neglect.

In any study of the country in the writings of Gaskell, it seemed to me that the starting point should be her letters: the country as it is depicted in her work as a whole appears to owe much to Gaskell’s own feeling for the countryside and her understanding of country people and their way of life. Interestingly, there is greater emphasis within the letters on the life of country people than on the living conditions of the working people of Manchester, where she lived and which is a key element in her social novels. As well as revealing the acuity of Gaskell’s observation of the country and the depth of her empathy with country people, the letters, in their spontaneous, informal style, employ many of the techniques which characterise Gaskell’s fictional writing and they also give insight into literary influences and her purposes, particularly in relation to her early writing.

Within this study, I have chosen to focus mainly on Gaskell’s depiction of the country within the short stories. Gaskell, herself, was somewhat dismissive of her short



stories,<sup>1</sup> viewing them largely as a welcome source of additional income, and, possibly for this reason, critics have tended to overlook their significance.<sup>2</sup> Yet the short stories set within the countryside represent a considerable element within her writing and afford invaluable insight into her view of the country and the way of life of country people. In the short stories, Gaskell ranges widely over different regions, from Welsh Wales to Northumberland, but the dales and fells of the Lake District and the bordering counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire remain her area of predilection. The stories reveal Gaskell's appreciation of the beauty of the countryside, but also her sensitivity, her awareness of the significance of the countryside as setting and its influence on the ordinary people who live and work there. Almost as a social historian, Gaskell is intrigued by rural life and customs, but she is also preoccupied by the characteristics of the breed of men and women engendered by these dales and fells and employs a wide range of techniques to convey their spirit and their way of life.

Since within the constraints of dissertation length it is not possible to consider Gaskell's depiction of the country across the full range of the novels, I have decided to select a single novel, *Sylvia's Lovers*, with which to compare the portrayal of the country in the short stories. The reason for my choice is that in *Sylvia's Lovers* Gaskell's depiction of ordinary farming life in North Yorkshire is closest in stance and technique to that of her portrayal of country life in the short stories. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, there is, moreover, an added dimension in Gaskell's representation of the contrast between town and country. In the 'condition-of-England' novels, *Mary Barton*, *North and South* and *Ruth*, which are all set within a manufacturing city or town, the country has still a presence within urban life. *Mary Barton* opens with a memorable description of a springtime holiday crowd in Green Heys Fields on the

outskirts of Manchester and certain of the working class characters are country born and bred. In *North and South* the industrial city and class conflicts are viewed largely through the eyes of the middle-class southerner, Margaret Hale, with all her nostalgia for the idealized image of the country village of her youth. The working classes of the industrial northern city are contrasted, moreover, with the peasantry of the rural south. Yet, overall, the country element in these two works is of lesser significance. In *Ruth*, however, parts of the novel are set in rural locations, most notably in North Wales, and the eponymous heroine remains at heart a country girl; yet, there is within the novel little portrayal of actual country people. *Wives and Daughters* is set in the small country town of Hollingford, with the grand country house of Cumnor Towers and the more modest manor, Hamley Hall, the seat of Squire Hamley, and so offers a broad range of social classes. The heroine, Molly Gibson, has an intense love of natural beauty and is never so happy as when she is scampering along the country lanes. Yet her view of the life of country people is that of a middle-class girl, sympathetic but seeing the farming community from an external viewpoint. The issues of change within the agricultural world are raised, as, indeed, they are in *My Lady Ludlow*, but they are not a central focus in the novel. In *Cousin Phillis*, in contrast, the life of the Holman family of Hope Farm seems to afford a picture of farming life in microcosm; yet there remains something ethereal about this image of rural life, as if it is a beautifully conveyed but idealised vision, serving as a backcloth to the poignant evolution of Phillis's love for Holdsworth and her sad realisation of its tragic futility. *Sylvia's Lovers*, on the contrary, has all the vitality and earthy reality of country life. As in the short stories, the setting of the countryside is an essential element in the life and being of the country characters: the farming family of Daniel Robson, the headstrong sailor turned farmer, his steady wife Bell, their high-spirited

daughter Sylvia and the gruff, good-hearted farm-servant, Kester. *Sylvia's Lovers* is, moreover, all the more interesting as a choice of novel, since nowhere else in her novels or short stories does Gaskell juxtapose so markedly town and country. She presents two contrasting settings and lifestyles, two different temperaments and sets of values, as she focuses in on the relationship between Sylvia and her townsman cousin, Philip Hepburn, and Sylvia's painful attempts to adapt to her marriage and life in the town. For these reasons, I have selected *Sylvia's Lovers* as the novel for detailed study, though I shall refer to the other novels wherever it is appropriate.

In writing this dissertation, my approach is essentially text-based, as a means of reflecting Gaskell's infinite subtlety as a writer. Her work exhibits a comprehensive, cohesive and intensely sensitive view of human existence. Her means of creative expression, however, are implicit rather than explicit and her subtlety lies in her power of suggestion and in the detail of her techniques. Gaskell's greatness as a writer, it could be argued, lies in the small print.

### Notes

- 1 Of 'The Doom of the Griffiths', for instance, when it was about to appear in *Harpers' Monthly Magazine*, Gaskell wrote to her American friend, Charles Eliot Norton, in December 1857, placing its origin in the 1830s: 'The story, per se, is an old rubbishy one, - begun when Marianne was a baby, - the only merit whereof is that it is founded on fact' (*The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1966, 488). Gaskell, we feel, does less than justice to her story.
- 2 To my knowledge, no critical work is dedicated to the short stories. The most comprehensive accounts of their genesis and assessment of their literary worth is to be found in the course of Jenny Uglow's authoritative biography, *Elizabeth Gaskell A Habit of Stories*, London, Faber and Faber, 1993, and in J. G. Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention*, Fontwell, Linden Press, 1970.

Other critical works contain chapters on the short stories, most notably in Angus Easson's *Elizabeth Gaskell*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, Chapter 8, 'The Short Stories', 199-226.

### The Country in the Letters

Elizabeth Gaskell's letters<sup>1</sup> give invaluable insight into her personality and her feeling for the countryside and country people and indicate influences on the development of her early writing. The interest of the letters lies not merely in the fascination of Gaskell's presence within them but also in the fact that her vision of the country, so evident in the letters, permeates her fictional writing. If, as Arthur Pollard has stressed, 'her preference for the world she sees helps to give the novels their vivid sense of actuality'<sup>2</sup>, this is equally true of the letters and the short stories.

Gaskell's love of the country is clear from her earliest letters. Though born in London, Gaskell was brought up in the small Cheshire town of Knutsford and though after her marriage she lived in Manchester, her love of the countryside was to remain with her all her life and significantly influence her writing. In a letter of 1838 to William and Mary Howitt<sup>3</sup>, Gaskell, as a young married woman, expresses all the poignancy of her longing to be in the countryside at springtime:

I was brought up in a country town, and my lot is now to live in or rather on the borders of a great manufacturing town, but when spring days first come and the bursting leaves and sweet earth smells tell me that 'Somer is ycomen in', I feel a stirring instinct and long to be off into the deep grassy solitudes of the country, just like a bird wakens up from its content at the change of the seasons and tends its way to some well-known but till then forgotten land. But as I happen to be a woman instead of a bird, as I have ties at home and duties to perform..., why I must stay at home(*GL* 14).

This letter indicates a fundamental tension in Gaskell's life: between her love of the countryside and yet her unquestioning acceptance of her emotional ties and obligations as wife and mother and her duty to support the social concerns of her

Unitarian minister husband, William Gaskell. This yearning for the countryside of those who find themselves obliged to live in cities is a constantly recurring theme in Gaskell's fictional writing, most notably in the character of Margaret Hale in *North and South*.

Writing more informally and with great spontaneity in a letter of 1836 to her sister-in-law Elizabeth, Gaskell conveys all her delight at being back at her maternal grandfather's farm of Sandlebridge<sup>4</sup> in spring:

Fancy me sitting in an old fashioned parlour 'doors & windows opened wide', with casement window opening into a sunny court all filled with flowers which scent the air with their fragrance – in the very depth of the country – 5 miles from the least approach to a town – the song of birds, the hum of insects the lowing of cattle the only sounds – and such pretty fields & woods all around...(GL 5-6)

The sounds, the scents, the images of the gentle Cheshire countryside are there, as she recreates this picture of herself looking out across the fields. As she watches her little daughter Marianne,<sup>5</sup> 'at the very tip-top of bliss', she is thrilled by the child's excitement and her language echoes the language which she uses with her child:

There are chickens, & little childish pigs, & cows & calves, & *baby horses*, & fish in the pond, & ducks in the lane, & the mill & the smithy, & sheep & baby-sheep, & flowers – oh! you would laugh to see her going about, with a great big nosegay in each hand, & wanting to be *bathed* in the golden bushes of wallflowers(GL 6).

With all her maternal instincts, Gaskell senses intuitively the value of this country experience for her child, just as, whilst living on the edge of Manchester, she is glad that there are fields and that her children 'can see cows milked and hay made in summer time'(GL 81). At Plymouth Grove, she had all the excitement and joy of a large garden and, as she wrote to her friend, Tottie Fox, she had every intention of establishing a miniature farm: 'Do you know I think we're going to keep a cow, and I'm sure we're going to keep a pig, because our pig sty is building and I find my

proper vocation is farming' (*GL* 171). Her lively, informal letters are instinct with her love of country life – and, it must be added, show her humour and ability to laugh quietly at herself.

As Jenny Uglow suggests,<sup>6</sup> wild Wales where Gaskell spent holidays with her Holland cousins at Plas Penrhyn on the Lleyn Peninsula, was for Gaskell an encounter with the Romantic landscapes of her reading, much as the Highlands were for Scott and the Lakes for Wordsworth. Whilst there may be nostalgia for the grandeur of the mountains of Snowdonia, frustratingly out of reach from Beaumaris, Gaskell usually presents a far from romanticised image of the countryside, as in her description of a wet walk from Festiniog to Cwm Morfyn Lake:

I could fancy that in dry weather it would be a very pleasant place for a picnic. When we were there it was as wet and boggy as heart could desire, and I sopped my feet completely, and went into one of those little cottages to take off my shoes & stockings and give them a thorough drying, and the woman cd not speak English or me Welsh, but we had merry laughs and some conversation, and a good piece of oat cake notwithstanding (*GL* 17).

Gaskell conveys an impression of the lived reality of that damp walk and her brief sketch of the scene in the Welsh cottage anticipates the acuity of observation of her short stories and novels.

Gaskell's letters reveal the significance of place for her, which is to be an essential element of her fictional writing. At Shottery near Stratford, she describes the house where she stayed – 'a very pretty, really old fashioned cottage... where one's head was literally in danger of being bumped by the low doors, ....and where the rooms were all entered by a step up, or a step down' (*GL* 80). The cottage, with its low doors bumping their heads, has a presence, a being of its own. Gaskell is fascinated by the actual lay-out of rooms in houses: at Lindeth Tower, their holiday home in Silverdale:

We live in a queer pretty crampy house, at the back of a great farm house. *Our* house is built round a square court, – Stay. We have all that is shaded\*, the rectangular piece is *two* stories high, the little bit by the lane one story, said little bit being kitchen and servants' bedrooms; the houses[sic] is covered with roses, and great white virgin-sceptred lilies, & sweetbriar bushes grow in the small flagged court...(GL 504)

\* refers to a plan which she had drawn.

Her description encapsulates all the lively spirit of the family parties, with come 'rain or fair' meals having to be carried across the courtyard. 'Think of the perils our legs of mutton undergo!' she exclaims. Interestingly, when visiting Les Rochers, Madame de Sévigné's country home near Vitré in Brittany, Gaskell sees a resemblance to the countryside near Arnside Tower in Silverdale, as they jog merrily along until they reach the old house with its thirteen towers – 'that I *counted*' – and the great walled-in garden. Gaskell conveys the little group's intense excitement, but dwells on the farm buildings, 'with cocks & hens, & donkeys, and turkeys &c all flourishing about, and here and there a blazing peacock, cows in the farmyard beyond'(GL 926). Gaskell's countrywoman's eye has lighted on the bustling activity of the farm scene.<sup>7</sup>

Gaskell's ability to convey a sense of character is evident in her brief sketches of the Welsh woman and of Lake District people – Mrs Nicholson, the blunt post-mistress at Ambleside who 'though short & stern till she sees you are really good for something...is true & sound at heart, & very interesting from her recollections of so much worth remembering'(GL 569)<sup>8</sup> and Mrs Preston of Mill Brow whom she recommends as a landlady to Charles Bosanquet: 'she is worth knowing, as a fine true friendly sensible woman... - N.B. She would *make* you change your stockings if you got your feet wet, and such like motherly and imperative cares'(GL 570).



Gaskell's letters have a quality undeniably close to that of her fictional writing. If the breathless spontaneity of the letters has to be tamed, there is the same intense feeling for the countryside and the way of life of its people and the same sharpness of observation and descriptive techniques as in the novels and short stories.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, moreover, Gaskell made extensive use of letters from various sources and, in describing her visit to Haworth in 1853, claimed to quote from 'a letter which [she] wrote at the time'.<sup>9</sup> This letter is, in general, in a composed style: indeed, the highly evocative description of the moors above Haworth - 'Oh! those high, wild, desolate moors, up above the whole world, and the very realms of silence!' (506) – seems consciously Brontë-esque. Yet Gaskell also skilfully uses realist detail in her description of Haworth's narrow street, 'so steep that the flagstones with which it is paved are placed end-ways, that the horses' feet may have something to cling to, and not slip down backwards', which she follows with the lively familiarity of a comment: 'But if the horses had cats' feet and claws, they would do all the better' (*ib.*). Whether the letter has been adapted or not, Gaskell clearly recognised the value of introducing the descriptive techniques of her letters into the biographical work.

Gaskell's letters are, moreover, an invaluable source of information on early literary influences, particularly the Lake poets and Crabbe, and contain some of her earliest published writing.<sup>10</sup> From Sandlebridge in May, 1836, Gaskell writes with intense lightness of heart and a lack of sophistication of her reading of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the springtime setting:

I have brought Coleridge with me, & am *doing* him & Wordsworth... *fit place for the latter!* I sat in a shady corner of a field gay with bright spring flowers -

daisies, primroses, wild anemones, & the 'lesser celandine,' & with lambs all around me – and the air so full of sweet sounds, & wrote my first chapr of W. yesterday in pencil – & to-day I'm going to finish him – and my heart feels so full of him I only don't know how to express my fullness without being too diffuse(*GL* 7).

She has 'done all [her] *composition* of Ld B - , & done Crabbe outright ... & got up Dryden & Pope'(*ib*). Gaskell collaborated with William in writing 'Sketches among the Poor, No 1', a narrative poem in which an old woman who had come to Manchester from the Lake District as a young girl and who, deaf and blind in old age, dreams of her childhood home, her father, her mother and her sisters, and the 'lark springing from his nest' and the bees that 'sang cheerily the live long day'.<sup>11</sup> This poem, as Gaskell acknowledges in a letter to Tottie Fox, contains the 'germ' of Alice Wilson in *Mary Barton*(*GL* 82).

Gaskell indicates in a letter of 1838 to Mary Howitt that the intention had been to write more sketches: 'We once thought of *trying* to write sketches among the poor, *rather* in the manner of Crabbe (now don't think this presumptuous), but in a more seeing-beauty spirit'(*GL* 33). Her thoughts turn to 'the beautiful truth' of a passage from Wordsworth's 'The Cumberland Beggar'. 'In short,' she continues, 'the beauty and poetry of many of the common things and daily events of life in its humblest aspect does not seem to me sufficiently appreciated'(*ib*). As Stephen Gill has indicated in his study *Wordsworth and the Victorians*,<sup>12</sup> Gaskell was profoundly influenced by Wordsworth, most notably in the early short stories and *Mary Barton*. Whilst, as Gill has shown, there are many Wordsworthian resonances in Gaskell's early writing, most significantly, in my view, the letters reveal that Gaskell shared with Wordsworth an awareness of the poignancy in the lives of ordinary people, in the

country as in the city, and it is this feeling which will characterize much of her fictional writing.

Gaskell's letters afford invaluable insight into her personality and reveal the depth of her love for the country. Her feeling for the beauty of nature accords with her Romantic sensitivity and is a feature likewise of her 'spiritual Unitarianism'.<sup>13</sup> Gaskell's sentiments clearly go well beyond mere nostalgia for the countryside and her letters are instinct with a profound empathy with country people and an understanding of their way of life. She writes with perspicacity, enlivening her letters with the same techniques which lend a sense of authenticity to her writing in general. Gaskell seems conscious of the innate conservatism of country life and, whilst recognizing the inevitability of change, she seems to have a belief in the durability of simple country values.

### Notes

- 1 Gaskell's letters are edited in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and A. Pollard, Manchester University Press, 1966, and *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and A. Shelston, Manchester University Press, 2000. All references to *The Letters (GL)* indicate page numbers rather than letter numbers.
- 2 A. Pollard, *Mrs Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer*, Manchester, 1965, 254, quoted by J. A. V. Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell A Portrait in Letters*, Manchester University Press, 1980, 107
- 3 On William and Mary Howitt, the Quaker writers and radical reformers, and Gaskell's connection with them, cf. J. Uglow (1993), 115-121. Although Gaskell did not meet the Howitts till 1841 in Germany, she had corresponded with them since 1838. Howitt was to publish Gaskell's first short stories, 'Life in Manchester: Libbie Marsh's Three Eras' and 'The Sexton's Hero' in his *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress* in 1847.

- 4 Sandlebridge is generally recognised as the source of Hope Farm in *Cousin Phillis* and, in my view, though this does not appear to be acknowledged elsewhere, of Milham Grange in *Ruth*.  
Sandlebridge is also described by Gaskell's friend, Mary Robberds, in an undated manuscript 'Recollections of a Long Life', published in *Private Voices The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland*, ed. J A V Chapple and Anita C. Wilson, Keele, Keele University Press, 1996, Appendix I, 108-113.
- 5 Gaskell kept intermittently a diary of the early childhood of Marianne, in which she records not only her daughter's development but also her own maternal anxieties, published in *Private Voices The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland*. Gaskell mentions (60) the visit to Knutsford in May, 1836.
- 6 Uglow(1993), 51
- 7 The Gaskell Society visited Les Rochers in September 2002. Fascinatingly, the house and gardens are much as Gaskell would have known them, though sadly the poultry and animals are gone.
- 8 Harriet Martineau, in 'A Year at Ambleside', included in Barbara Todd's *Harriet Martineau at Ambleside*, Carlisle, Bookcase, 2002, 39-157, also writes with enthusiasm of the Ambleside postmistress as 'a favourite with us all' (55-56).
- 9 *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston, London, Penguin, 1975, 505-506. Chapple and Pollard's edition of Gaskell's letters includes two letters, nos. 166 and 167, believed to be written from Haworth in September, 1853. Chapple suggests that the first letter, which is taken from a printed source, may have been written to John Forster; the second, however, is found only in a manuscript of the *Life*, held by the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester. Juliet Barker, in her biography, *The Brontës*, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996), suggests that this letter 'is an edited, reordered and polished version of her extant letter' (962, n.68). This may well be the case, but, either way, it proves Gaskell's recognition of the value of her letter style within her biography.
- 10 Without mentioning his source, William Howitt incorporated within his work, *The Rural Life of England*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1840), substantial sections of a letter which Gaskell had written to Mary Howitt in 1838, in which she described country customs of Cheshire and Lancashire, drawing on her own experience in Knutsford (GL28-33), cf. Carol A Martin, 'Elizabeth Gaskell's Contribution to the Work of William Howitt' in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 40 no1 (1985), 94-100. As Martin points out, Howitt, in his editing, eliminates the personal elements of Gaskell's writing, her concern that 'poetical beliefs are vanishing with the passing generation' which she can 'share in part because of her fellow feeling with the country people who hold them'. Howitt, on the contrary, 'views the customs with more distance and a sense of superiority' (100).

- 11 'Sketches among the Poor No1' is reproduced by Edgar Wright as Appendix C of his edition of *Mary Barton* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987), 471-474. Uglow (1993), 101-104, gives a detailed discussion of the poem, comparing it to the poems of Crabbe's 'The Parish Register' and *The Borough* and identifying also the influence of Wordsworth's 'Reverie of Poor Susan'. Uglow considers that the Gaskells' poem, though capturing the 'essential loneliness' of Crabbe's figures transferred from a rural landscape, 'lacks the strength of his irony, his challenging direct speech and telling details, whilst inheriting some of his weaknesses, particularly the use of generalized epithets' (102).
- 12 Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, 'The Poetry of Humble Life', 114-144
- 13 On Gaskell's 'spiritual Unitarianism' and its association with Romanticism and the influence of American Transcendentalism, cf. Kay Millard, 'The Religion of Elizabeth Gaskell', in *Gaskell Society Journal*, vol. 15 (2001), 1-13, (9).

### **The Country in the Short Stories**

Within the fictional writing of Elizabeth Gaskell, the short stories form a substantial element and span her whole writing career. It is the country, moreover, which is the setting for a majority of the short stories, which range over a wide spectrum of rural life. Almost without exception, these stories are set in regions known to Gaskell:

‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’ and ‘The Doom of the Griffiths’ in Welsh Wales, ‘The Old Nurse’s Story’ in the remote moorlands of Northumberland and even the German countryside in ‘Six Weeks at Heppenheim’; but Gaskell’s predilection is for the rugged northern region of the Lakeland fells of Cumberland and Westmoreland and the bordering counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire, which she depicts in such stories as ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’, ‘The Half-Brothers’, ‘The Moorland Cottage’ and ‘The Crooked Branch’. What characterises all of these stories is Gaskell’s feeling for the countryside and her empathy with country people.

In this chapter, I will base my discussion on a selection of short stories, drawing mainly from ‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’, ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’ (and its precursor, ‘Martha Preston’), ‘The Half-Brothers’, ‘Cumberland Sheep-Shearers’, ‘The Moorland Cottage’ and ‘The Crooked Branch’, whilst making reference also to a number of other stories. As the stories were written over a period of some twenty years and were addressed to different audiences, there is some variation in Gaskell’s stance and techniques, which adds to their richness and complexity. After discussing the influence of Wordsworth on Gaskell’s representation of the country, I will address questions of source and period and consider the element of ‘social history’ within

Gaskell's fictionalisation, before turning to the significance of the countryside as setting, the inherent characteristics of country people and fictional techniques.

If the stories owe their origin to Gaskell's own experience of the country regions, it is to be accepted that in her writing Gaskell was influenced by the Romantic poets, most notably by Wordsworth whom she greatly admired.<sup>1</sup> In *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, Stephen Gill emphasises the depth of Gaskell's debt to Wordsworth<sup>2</sup> and in her biography of Gaskell, Uglow tellingly suggests that the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* 'has been read, learnt and thoroughly digested.'<sup>3</sup> In her unpublished doctoral thesis, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Romanticism: The Romantic Inheritance and her Shorter Works', Irene Wiltshire likewise recognises that Wordsworth is the primary Romantic influence in Gaskell's short stories.<sup>4</sup>

While there are undoubtedly many Wordsworthian resonances in the short stories, it is not always easy to judge what is conscious imitation and what stems merely from the fact that Gaskell was so imbued with Wordsworth's poetry. One might add that on occasion it is when Gaskell is at her most Wordsworthian that her description is less than felicitous, as in her injunction to the reader in 'Martha Preston': 'sit down on this felled tree, and while the noonday hum of busy insects in the wood mingles with the hum of the bees in yonder hives, I will weave together what I have learnt of "Martha Preston."' <sup>5</sup> It has to be borne in mind, however, that what may be acceptable in lyrical poetry can appear *de trop* in prose; any excesses tend, moreover, to be limited to Gaskell's earlier stories. In the 'consciously poetic scene-setting' of the opening of 'The Sexton's Hero' where 'the afternoon sun shed down his glorious rays on the grassy churchyard' and 'the summer insects made luxurious lullaby', Gill sees a

parallel with the beginning of *The Excursion*, Book 1.<sup>6</sup> I feel that the comparison is stretched and, at any rate, prefer the greater realism of Gaskell's subsequent description of the grey stone wall of the vicarage garden, with its lichens, ferns and ivy and 'the vivid scarlet of the crane's-bill ... in every nook and crevice'.<sup>7</sup>

In his *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Angus Easson finds Gaskell at her 'most characteristically Wordsworthian' in the three stories: 'Half a Life-Time Ago', 'The Half-Brothers' and 'The Crooked Branch',<sup>8</sup> and with this opinion I readily concur. It is not merely the choice of setting – 'The Crooked Branch' is set, at any rate, in the North Riding of Yorkshire – but in the descriptive detail and in the solidity of the characters, caught in the reality of their everyday lives, that there is, for me, the quality of certain passages in *The Prelude*. In drawing parallels between Wordsworth's and Gaskell's view of rural life, I would, however, sound a *caveat*. In many of the lyrical ballads and in some of the stories of *The Excursion*, there is despondency in Wordsworth's image of rural decline: the shepherd clutches hopelessly 'the last of the flock', the brothers are 'the last of their race' and Michael's sheep-fold remains uncompleted, as he gazes out over Greenhead Ghyll, with the memory of his son Luke lost to him in the 'dissolute city' and never to return. Gaskell, admittedly writing later, is conscious of a passing era, but seems to affirm that, though change may come, the rural way of life and country values will survive. Gaskell's vision of the country owes at least as much to personal experience as to literary influences.

Gaskell had a natural bent for storytelling – for Charles Dickens she was, after all, his 'dear Scheherezade'. She had, moreover, an ear for local lore: 'The Half-Brothers' is believed to have been inspired by Dorothy Wordsworth's account of the death of the



‘poor Greens’, lost in a snowstorm on the fells between Langdale and Easedale;<sup>9</sup> for ‘The Sexton’s Hero’, there were many tales of unwary travellers meeting their deaths on the quicksands of Morecambe Bay. As Sharps points out,<sup>10</sup> it has long been assumed that ‘Martha Preston’ and ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’ are based on a real-life story and, indeed, the fact that Gaskell retells the same story would suggest that this might be the case. For ‘The Crooked Branch’, Gaskell indicates in a letter of 1859 to her publisher, George Smith, that ‘the story itself is *true*’, having been told her in 1849 by Mr Justice Erle and Mr Tom Taylor.<sup>11</sup> In certain other stories, like ‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’, Gaskell asserts that she has been told the tale, though it may be assumed that on occasion this is merely a literary device. Whether or not a story has a direct source in country lore, does not seem, however, to affect our sense of its veracity or Gaskell’s artistry as a storyteller.

In her choice of period for the short stories set in the country, Gaskell often looks back to the past, on occasion, to a relatively remote period – ‘The Poor Clare’ is set in the first half of the eighteenth century – but, more often, the stories take place at the turn of the century: ‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’ is a tale of ‘many years back – a life-time ago’, ‘The Crooked Branch’ is set ‘not many years after the beginning of this century’ and the title ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’ is self-explicit. Despite this temporal distancing, the narrative standpoint is often the present time and in her portrayal of rural society, Gaskell may well be closer to her day than is appreciated initially. Much as with George Eliot, who, though setting *Adam Bede* in the early years of the century, draws on her own familiarity with the Warwickshire countryside, so too Gaskell transposes her own experience of the rural society of her time. In ‘The Half-Brothers’, the narrator’s objective account of his mother’s first marriage and early

widowhood, when she was forced by circumstances into what was for her a loveless second marriage, is as much of Gaskell's day as of forty years earlier. Indeed, in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Gaskell admits to this temporal continuity: if she sets the beginning of the story of William and Margaret Dixon and their daughter Susan precisely 'fifty or fifty-one years ago', in describing the statesmen farmers of Cumberland and Westmoreland, she declares: 'such were – such are – the characteristics of a class now passing away from the face of the land'.<sup>12</sup> In much the same way, in 'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers', Gaskell describes 'an old-fashioned shearing, such as', the farmer's wife affirms, '[is] not often met with now in the Dales'.<sup>13</sup> Almost as a social historian, Gaskell seems drawn towards recording customs which may be dying away. Yet the reader senses in her writing an underlying belief in the durability of the way of life and the inherent values of country people.

In 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Gaskell's empathy with the class of prosperous statesmen farmers is evident. There is, moreover, a marked parallel between her description of the Dixons in the story and the account which she gives of the Prestons of Mill Brow Farm in a letter of 1859 to Charles Bosanquet:

Mrs Preston of Mill Brow... is worth knowing, as a fine true friendly sensible woman... Wordsworth said once of the Prestons that they were a 'Homeric family'. I am sorry to say the father sometimes drinks. I say it because you ought to be told \ or else when sober he is a fine simple fellow/. Mrs Preston's family have lived in that house and on that land for more than 200 years, as I have heard. They have no ambition, but much dignity, – and look at that family of stately sons & daughters!(*GL* 570-571).<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Gaskell emphasises the positive moral attributes of the statesmen farmers:

William and Margaret Dixon were rather superior people, of a character belonging – as far as I have seen – exclusively to the class of Westmoreland and Cumberland statesmen – just, independent, upright; not given to much speaking; kind-hearted, but not demonstrative; disliking change, and new ways, and new people; sensible

and shrewd; each household self-contained, and its members having little curiosity as to their neighbours...(CP 61).

Gaskell is aware of certain failings, but her gently ironic criticism is indulgent: they have 'a certain kind of sober pleasure in amassing money', which, she admits, may make them 'miserable', that is miserly, in old age; if occasionally the men go off 'laking', their women-folk walk miles in dead of night, lantern in hand, to bring home the 'solemnly-drunken husband' (*ib.*). Gaskell mutes her criticism, choosing to emphasise the wives' support of their husbands, though later in the story, in a more clearly fictionalised vein, she does not hesitate to describe the brutishness of Michael Hurst's drunkenness and Susan Dixon's physical violence as with a hazel-stick she rounds on a would-be suitor.

Gaskell's has a countrywoman's eye and the Lakeland stories are firmly rooted in her knowledge of farming practices and conventions. In 'Martha Preston', the value of the farmland is precisely described: there are 'forty acres of land, some rocky and sterile, hardly fit even for feeding sheep, some mere bog, and as such, only good to furnish peat for fuel, some rich meadow-land...' (*SUM* 133). In 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Susan Dixon's Yew Nook farm on Oxenfell is 'of some thirty or forty acres of land', with 'an hereditary right to a sheep-walk' (CP 59). After the moral portrait of the statesmen farmers, Gaskell passes to the description of William Dixon as a shrewd stock farmer, breeding and rearing cattle and sheep, rather than an arable farmer, while Margaret Dixon contributes to the farm economy with her butter and eggs. Gaskell's story has its very basis, moreover, in the conventions of farming life – a different matter, I feel, from her use of realistic detail to enhance authenticity, which I shall discuss later in this chapter. She describes the farmers' custom of sending their sons to be 'farm-servants' for a year or two to learn farming methods before setting

up on land of their own. Michael Hurst's position as farm servant is specifically indicated: 'he worked with the master, and lived with the family, and was in all respects treated as an equal, except in the field' (*CP* 62). Thus the relationships between the Dixons and the Hursts are established, with the families coming together for sheep-shearing at Wythburne and for the 'Christmas-tide feasting' at Yew Nook. While the two fathers stroll round the fields, examining cattle and sheep, the mothers inspect the dairies and 'household arrangements', each, as Gaskell comments with a smile, 'openly admiring the plans of the other, but secretly preferring their own' (*ib.*). Though the story is set some fifty years earlier, Gaskell bases her story so clearly on the social conventions of the statesmen farmers of her day: the narrative tone is relatively objective, though an occasional tinge of indulgent humour betrays the author's stance.

'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers', as Suzanne Lewis suggests in her Introduction(ix), is 'typical of the sketch, part fiction and part journalism' which was popular with the readers of Dickens' *Household Words*.<sup>15</sup> The piece appears to be based on an actual experience of a sheep-shearing festivity which Gaskell enhances with fictional techniques. It is set 'three or four years ago', when, she asserts, the family spent part of a summer 'in the neighbourhood of Keswick' (*DNW* 233);<sup>16</sup> uniquely, to my knowledge, she incorporates her four children within the account, thus adding a further personal dimension. The farmhouse is set on a natural terrace looking out over Derwentwater to the Catbells beyond. In her description of the farmhouse interior Gaskell conveys the sense of solidity and historical continuity through the generations: the large bedroom, the 'state apartment', as she terms it, where the family is received, with its 'stupendous bed, with its posts, and its head-piece, and its foot-

board... large enough for six or seven to lie comfortably therein' and the 'house-place' or kitchen, with its oaken dresser, great fire-place and 'master's cupboard' (235-36). The farmer's wife, so proud and hospitable, pours green and black tea simultaneously from two teapots into one cup and presses on the children the 'sweet butter' for their 'clap-bread', which is too sickly for them to eat. Gaskell's account has extraordinary vitality, which is underpinned by her shrewd observation of farming custom and practice. The buxom young beauty, Isobel Crosthwaite, so disdainful of the hostess's handsome young Tom, is resentful, Gaskell feels, because the parents 'have fixed that these young ones are to wed each other' (243). Gaskell describes in detail the sheep-shearers' technique, as astride their bench they dexterously shear each sheep in this 'rural Olympics', but she also draws attention to the significant role of the women-folk in folding the fleeces most advantageously for marketing. With the old farmer's account of the Lakeland system of the 'sheep-walk', the pretence of fictionalisation seems to fade away, as Gaskell recounts, absorbingly, the details of the financial arrangements with the landlord, the calendar of the sheep-farmer's year and the fluctuation in wool prices with the import of Australian wool. The interest of this story lies as much in the substance of the account of farming life as in the liveliness of Gaskell's fictionalisation.

As both 'Half a Life-Time Ago' and 'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers' are set in the Lake District, it is interesting to attempt to ascertain whether Gaskell's view of rural society in Wales differs substantially from that in the northwest of England. Gaskell perceives a certain backwardness in the Welsh-speaking North Wales, a region which she has known since her childhood. In the description of the village of Pen-Morfa, the narrator, in a voice which seems strongly personalised, dwells on the centuries old

cottages with their single large room, with the beds with cupboard-like wooden doors ranged round the room, and then comments on the confusing inconsistency in family names. In a tone which is uncharacteristically harsh for Gaskell, the narrator affirms: 'I could tell you of a great deal which is peculiar and wild in these true Welsh people, who are what I suppose we English were a century ago...'.<sup>17</sup> This 'wildness' is to be found, for instance, in the savage, distrustful figure of the beekeeper caring for her deformed child. If Gaskell emphasises the primitive nature of Welsh life, her character types do not seem to differ radically from those in the stories of northern England: in 'The Doom of the Griffiths', Nest's father casts a covetous eye towards Bodowen, the estate which Owen Griffiths will inherit, and in 'The Well of Pen-Morfa', the calculating farmer, Edward Williams appears to be a more ruthless version of Nathan Huntroyd in 'The Crooked Branch'. If a distinction is to be made, Gaskell seems to view Welsh society and the Welsh way of life with intrigued curiosity, which lacks the warmth, the complicity, which she feels for the Lakeland people.

If it is in 'Half a Life-Time Ago' and 'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers' that Gaskell seeks most explicitly to record rural customs and practices, her knowledge of the countryside and country people underpins the short stories as a whole. In her representation of contemporary rural society, a fine distinction cannot always be drawn between social commentary and fictional mode, which Gaskell allows to meld imperceptibly into one another. I shall now turn to consider some of the more purely fictional aspects of the short stories: the significance of the countryside as setting, the inherent characteristics of country people and implicit social issues, and the techniques of fictionalisation.

In Gaskell's short stories, the countryside itself is of prime significance: her settings convey atmosphere and influence the very existence of characters, forming a constituent element affecting the evolution of the tales. In the opening of 'The Poor Clare', Gaskell evokes the mysterious bleakness of the setting. Starkey Manor-house in the Trough of Bowland in north-east Lancashire is a 'grey, massive, old keep', built against the marauding Scots, with the rooms of the newer hall grouped around. But the hall and the grand gardens are derelict, with the wild deer grazing up to the windows. From the desolate house the reader's gaze is directed out to its austere setting in the bleak rocky hills of the Trough of Bowland, with their lower slopes covered in 'tangled copsewood and green depths of fern'.<sup>18</sup> The few cottages, constructed of strong beams inter-filled with mud and rubble, with a hole in the roof in place of a chimney, evoke a strange primitive age. Into this setting, full of mystery and foreboding, rides the oddly pathetic group of the Starkey family, returning to their family seat after years of exile.

In 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Gaskell emphasises in her opening the isolation of the remote farmstead of Yew Nook, off from the road over Oxenfell to Coniston. The setting of the grey stone house is dark and austere, with 'a square of farm-buildings, surrounding a green space of rough turf' and 'a mighty, funereal umbrageous yew making a solid shadow, as of death, in the very heart and centre of the light and heat of the brightest summer day' (*CP* 59).<sup>19</sup> The sombreness of the scene is relieved only by the little stream, bubbling from a crevice in the rock, with a life-giving water supply. But Gaskell, with telling detail, hints at a brighter past: sombre as the house may be at the present day, in the lifetime of Susan Dixon, 'every small diamond pane

in the windows glittered with cleanliness' (*ib*). Yet she then reverts to the grimmer image of the dour, silent woman unwelcoming to strangers and so creates in the mind of the reader a sense of mystery and anticipation.

In contrast to the austere setting of 'Half a Life-Time Ago', in 'The Moorland Cottage' Gaskell evokes a gentler and happier image of seclusion. The sense of the cottage's remoteness is conveyed by the description of the long approach to it, up through the fields and across the common, with its gorse and purple heather and the lark singing and all the light-heartedness of a bright sunny day.<sup>20</sup> The cottage is a haven from the world – 'like the place the Sleeping Beauty lived in' (*MC* 19), as Maggie describes it to Erminia – and the summer scene embodies the apparent happiness of Maggie's youth. But Maggie needs her own private refuge, up the hillside, on a grey rock beneath the thorn tree,<sup>21</sup> where, in a Wordsworthian spirit, 'under the sweet influence of nature', she finds solace and nearness to God: 'she felt it easier to speak to Him and come to Him for help, sitting lonely, with wild moors swelling and darkening around her, and not a creature in sight but the specks of distant sheep, and the birds that shun the haunts of men, floating in the still mid-air' (53). Though Gaskell's description of Maggie's feelings does not avoid sentimentality, the changing landscape is seen to echo her mood, offering solace and support in times of crisis.

In 'The Well of Pen-Morfa', as the title of the story might lead us to expect, the setting of the well has symbolical significance. The importance of the well's location is emphasised because the narrator's initial description of it is placed immediately prior to the commencement of Nest Gwynn's story:



There are rocks high above Pen-Morfa... The great, sharp ledges, which would otherwise look hard and cold, are adorned with the brightest-coloured moss, and the golden lichen. Close to, you see the scarlet leaves of the crane's-bill, and the tufts of purple heather, which fill up every cleft and cranny; but, in the distance, you see only the general effect of infinite richness of colour, broken, here and there, by great masses of ivy(*MC* 125).<sup>22</sup>

The well is 'sharp down under the rocks', with a slippery path leading across rock slabs to it. This setting of the well is the focus of key episodes in Nest's life and the seasons of the year are echoed in her mood. Here, on an autumn morning when 'the dew lay heavy on the grass, and the thrushes were busy among the mountain-ash berries'(127), Edward Williams proposes to Nest; here, on an icy winter's day, she falls on the 'smooth, slippery, treacherous rock', where 'the freshet had frozen on the slanting stone'(128), crippling herself for life; and here, one bright spring day some thirty years later, Nest returns discovering that 'all was the same. Nature was as fresh and young as ever'(142) and finding her lost youth and peace in death. Gaskell attenuates the harshness and cruelty of Nest's story by associating the beauty of the natural setting with her spiritual rebirth.

Within her stories, Gaskell evokes the seasons of the year and nowhere more powerfully than in her descriptions of the wild winter storms of the Lake District. Though, as far as is known, she never visited the Lakes in winter, she transposes imaginatively scenes familiar to her in summer into all the harshness of their winter setting. In 'The Half-Brothers', the tone of the narrator's account is soberly objective, except in the intensely emotional description of his youthful panic, as he found himself lost on a 'wild boggy moor where the solitude seemed painful, intense, as if never footfall of man had come thither to break the silence';<sup>23</sup> his voice, as he cried out, came back to him 'so weird and strange, in that noiseless expanse of black darkness' and, as the snow fell thick and fast, the desolation of the scene seems

transmuted into his own desperate fear of the 'desolate, helpless death' awaiting him. Similarly, in 'Martha Preston', Gaskell evokes the 'awful quiet' of the deserted moor, as almost blinded by the falling snow, Martha struggles up the fellside after her dog, until in the obscurity she comes on the 'black heap...fast becoming whitened by the ceaseless snow' of a child half asleep, whom she helps down the hill and discovers to be the son of her old lover(*SUM* 137). In the parallel account in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', the imaginative power lies in the intensity of Susan Dixon's physical struggle in penetrating the snow-bound copse, 'breaking down the bush, stumbling, bruising herself, fighting her way, her lantern held between her teeth and she herself using head as well as hands to butt away a passage'(*CP* 97), until she feels something soft beneath her foot, the body of a dead man, whom she drags bodily back down the fellside and recognises as her former betrothed, Michael Hurst. In my view, this powerful account verges on the melodramatic and lacks the gentler appeal and greater credibility of the earlier version in 'Martha Preston'.

If the countryside has an undoubted impact on the lives of country people, Gaskell emphasises also that their inherent characteristics are born of the rude countryside where for decades their families have lived and died. Like the rough northerners of the Pennine hills in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and the passionate seafaring breed of the north-east in *Sylvia's Lovers*, the farmers owe their very nature to the land of their birth. They are fiercely attached to their farmsteads handed down from generation to generation. In 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Michael Hurst, being a younger son, lusts after Willie Dixon's land – 'land to possess, to cultivate, to make profit from, to bequeath'(*CP* 80). The farmers are shrewd and fiercely independent, traditional and resisting change, setting store by their hard-earned money. They have a streak of

violence in their disposition: Michael Hurst, exasperated by the weakness of Willie Dixon kicks and beats him, even before he has cause for jealousy, and in 'The Half-Brothers', William Preston gives vent to his jealous anger in the physical mistreatment of his stepson. Though staunch and upright, they can be ruthlessly intransigent: in 'Lizzie Leigh', James Leigh refuses to allow his daughter's name to be mentioned for the shame which she has brought upon the family, declaring that 'henceforth they would have no daughter; that she would be as one dead'<sup>24</sup> and he finds forgiveness only on his deathbed. The farmers are pragmatic and unemotional: in 'The Crooked Branch', Nathan Huntroyd, needing to get him a wife, seeks out his former sweetheart Hester Rose and, looking her over, thinks: 'She'll do'; in 'The Well of Pen-Morfa', Edward Williams, with almost unconscious cruelty, tells Eleanor Gwynn that her crippled daughter will 'never be fit to be any man's wife'(MC 132). Yet Gaskell shows that beneath the surface there may lie a more tender heart: Nathan takes in his orphaned niece, Bessy Rose; William Dixon is proud of his high-spirited daughter Susan; Will Leigh, who is 'like his father, stern, reserved and scrupulously upright'(CP 4) shows kindness and devotion towards his widowed mother.

If the farmers are direct and pragmatic, their wives are sensible women, respectful and intensely loyal to their husbands, even though, like Margaret Dixon, they may be conscious of their failings. The bond between husband and wife has its basis in mutual respect and understanding. In 'Lizzie Leigh', James and Anne Leigh's marriage 'had been as calm and happy as the most perfect uprightness on the one side, and the most complete confidence and loving submission on the other, could make it'(CP 1), but in the face of her husband's intransigent rejection of their daughter, Anne's 'hidden, sullen rebellion' broke 'the old landmarks of wifely duty and

affection'; James' death-bed repentance, however, as Gaskell notes with a tinge of irony, 'replaced him upon his throne' (*ib.*). The women, though resolute, have gentler dispositions than their husbands and are deeply attached to their children and their younger siblings. Nathan Huntroyd realistically recognises their responsibility as parents in over-indulging their son Benjamin, but Hester, so strongly bound to her son, cannot bring herself to acknowledge his failings. Eleanor Gwynn, against her inner feelings, tries to persuade her daughter that she can never be a farmer's wife, but then has to face the anguish of Nest's rejection of her: 'Nest... revolted from her mother; she revolted from the world. She bound her sorrow tight up in her breast, to corrode and fester there' (*MC* 133). Nest's feelings are violent and self-destructive, until she finds her redemption in faith.

In 'Half a Life-Time Ago', Susan Dixon bestrides Gaskell's male and female worlds. In the opening of the story, Gaskell inverts chronology, describing first the austere woman whom the middle-aged Susan has become: 'the tall, gaunt, hard-featured angular woman who never smiled, and hardly ever spoke an unnecessary word' (*CP* 60). As much as any man, she is a shrewd farmer, selling her cattle and farm produce, 'keen after a bargain – a hard one to have to do with', but loyally served by those who were 'rather her fellow-labourers than her servants' (*ib.*). This woman contrasts forcibly with the 'fine-looking girl, bright-spirited and rosy; ...when the hearth at Yew Nook had been as bright as she, with family love and youthful hope and mirth' (*ib.*). The reasons for the hardening of Susan's personality lie at the very heart of the story, but beneath the harsh exterior Gaskell subtly maintains the sensitivity of the inner woman and the infinite sadness of her lonely loveless existence: when Willie died, 'there was no one to love her. Worse doom still there was no one left on earth

for her to love'(93). But the strong hard woman who drags Michael Hurst's body down the mountainside will find emotional fulfilment in 'adopting' his widow and children. As Gaskell concludes, echoing the terse biblical language of the Lakeland dales: 'And so it fell out that the latter days of Susan Dixon's life were better than the former'(102).

Gaskell emphasises the isolation of the young women on the farmsteads, in contrast to the farmers' sons: Martha Preston's young brother Johnnie is sent to school in Grasmere, but can Martha herself read and write? Bessy Rose can barely write a letter, while her aunt Hester, sensitive though she may be, has never had the chance to learn to read. The young Susan Dixon's world lies within the farm, whereas Michael Hurst is free to go off to the village to dance and carouse, though Susan has little time for such frivolities. For Gaskell, the young women undeniably enjoy the moral high ground: they are infinitely more sensitive and perceptive than the young men and, in the case of Martha Preston and Susan Dixon, are willing to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of a defenceless younger brother. In contrast to the young women, William Hawkshaw and Michael Hurst, when thwarted in love and failing to gain the coveted farms, take to drink and go rapidly downhill. Benjamin Huntroyd is easily corrupted by his schoolfellows and is callous and cruelly manipulative of his parents, as he falls into extravagant ways and crime in London. The primitive violence latent in his character emerges when he returns with accomplices to rob and brutally assault his parents: the lure of the city is a destructive force.

In 'The Moorland Cottage', the youthful Maggie Browne, the curate's daughter, is of a higher social order: her widowed mother, though in reduced circumstances, is

determined to maintain an appearance of gentility. Maggie may be a romantic dreamer and a self-denying idealist, but she is more perceptive of her brother Edward's failings than is his mother. In contrast to the blind effeteness of the middle-class Mrs Browne, the servant Nancy has a shrewd awareness of Edward's deceitfulness and, in the tradition of Gaskell's servant women, supports the young Maggie with her common sense and pragmatism. Edward, corrupted by city ways, commits forgery, whilst his self-denying sister, in order to save him, is prepared to sacrifice – or at least postpone – her own happiness in marriage.<sup>25</sup> In 'The Moorland Cottage', as in other short stories set in the country, the 'dissolute city' of Wordsworth's Michael is seen from afar as a source of decadence and crime. Gaskell emphasises the positive moral values of the rural way of life in contrast to the corrupting evil of the city.

Gaskell's short stories gain in veracity because they are so firmly embedded in the everyday reality of country life. Her realist techniques allow her to recreate a whole way of life and to provide insight into the characters and their interrelationships. For this reason, I shall consider a variety of her fictional techniques, particularly her use of visual detail and direct speech, in relation, primarily, to two of the more markedly realist stories: 'Half a Life-Time Ago' and 'The Crooked Branch'. 'Half a Life-Time Ago' offers an interesting contrast with the earlier version, 'Martha Preston'. This latter story is basically a simple narrative account of the life of the increasingly lonely heroine, whereas in 'Half a Life-Time Ago' Gaskell widens her range of characters and introduces more scenes of domestic life. If in 'Martha Preston' there is only a single short dialogue scene between Martha and Will Hawkshaw, in 'Half a Life-Time Ago' Gaskell's story gains much of its dynamism from the realistic detail of

dramatic scenes which underpins the psychological interplay between characters. Susan Dixon watches her dying mother whose anxiety is betrayed by her fingers moving nervously on the bed-quilt. As the older woman seeks to warn her daughter of her father's impatience with his weakling son, it is the details which she draws from her daily life which convey her indulgent protectiveness: her son 'cannot always stomach oat-cake and porridge' and there is 'better than three pound in th' old black teapot on the top shelf of the cupboard' for Susan to 'keep a piece of loaf-bread by her for Will' (CP 63). As in *Sylvia's Lovers*, which I shall discuss in a later chapter, it is the homeliness of the trivial objects which makes a direct appeal to the reader's sympathy. As Susan and Michael Hurst squabble in the farm kitchen, the flickering fire seems to echo their simmering anger and when the hapless Willie accidentally pokes a piece of burning wood up into his face, Michael's furious 'Thou great lounging, clumsy chap' as he roundly kicks the boy, is met by Susan's ominous rejoinder: 'I'll tell thee what, Michael, that lad's motherless but not friendless', as the fire casts a ghastly shadow over her face (66). Gaskell conveys Willie's jealous moping by the image of him alone in an outhouse 'whittling and carving uncouth heads on hazel-sticks' (71), just as, later, his wailing "Willie, boo" confirms that after his debilitating fever he has become a 'natural', an idiot. Willie's 'little rattling paper mill', given him by Michael when he deceitfully took him to the doctor at Kendal, assumes a symbolical significance: when Willie finds Susan in tears at having learnt that Michael has taken up with Nelly Hebthwaite, he thrusts the toy into his sister's face to comfort her and in so doing breaks it, so that the broken toy becomes a symbol of Susan's lost love. 'It won't do,' Susan says, 'It will never do again' (115).

If many of the key scenes take place in the farm kitchen or in the rickyard and outbuildings, the more formal 'house-place', 'a sort of better kitchen', is appropriately the setting for the final rupture between Susan and Michael. Gaskell contrasts the hot, dishevelled Susan, returning from market, and Michael and his sister, Mrs Gale, in her best silk gown. After their departure, Susan pounds away at making clap-bread, 'one of the hardest and hottest domestic tasks of a Daleswoman' (88), an activity which Gaskell uses to convey all her heroine's pent-up frustration and heartache. Peggy, the servant woman, consoles her young mistress: 'Lass! Thou hast done well. It is not long to bide, and then the end will come' (*ib.*), with all the stoical resignation of Gaskell's simple country woman.

In the short stories, Gaskell rarely uses extended physical description of her characters, but in the opening of 'The Crooked Branch' she gives a sustained depiction of the middle-aged servant, Hester Rose:

Hester stood there... The comely beauty of youth had faded away entirely; she was, as I have said, homely-looking, plain-featured, but with a clean skin, and pleasant, frank eyes. Her figure was no longer round, but tidily draped in a blue and white bedgown, tied round her waist by her white apron-strings, and her short linsey petticoat showed her tidy feet and ankles.<sup>26</sup>

Hester's face, figure and dress are indicative of the neat, clean servant that she has become, but the effectiveness of the scene lies also in the fact that she is viewed by Nathan Holroyd, who, needing a wife, seeks out his old love of twenty years ago and, on seeing her, thinks bluntly to himself: 'She'll do.' Gaskell develops the subtle interplay between the two characters. Nathan concludes his blunt proposal: 'That's all. If thou'lt have me, I'll come for thee as soon as the hay is gotten in' (*ib.*), but as Hester busies herself getting the family's dinner, Nathan can perceive the change of colour, the slight trembling which emboldens him to seize a kiss. Gaskell not merely



captures the look, the gesture, which betray feeling, but she also conveys the other character's awareness of the underlying emotion.

If Gaskell is restrained in her use of dialect in the early short stories, in 'The Crooked Branch' she catches the directness of the Yorkshire dialect. When his wayward son Benjamin demands money, Nathan strikes his stick deep into the ground and turns to face his son: 'Three hunder pound! I'll be darned an' danged too, if I know where to get 'em, if I'd be making a fool o' thee an' mysen too'(240). With the colourful imagery of the country language, Bessy Rose justifies Benjamin's desire to go to London: 'Lads aren't like lasses, to be teed to their own fireside like th' crook yonder'(232), and even his indulgent mother recognises the speciousness of Benjamin's speech: 'he minces his words as if his tongue were clipped short, or split like a magpie's'(238).

As in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', the farm kitchen is at the heart of family life. Faced with Benjamin's imminent departure for London, the old couple sit silently, hand-in-hand on the fireside settle, gazing at the fire and then urge Bessy to bring up the 'creepie-stool' beside them. Gaskell, with this visual image of the three characters, evokes the complicity in the relationship and their shared sense of helplessness and loss. Late in the story, Gaskell describes in detail the arrangement of the rooms in the Huntroyds' farmhouse: the 'house-place', the small parlour with its 'best' furnishings, which is never used, the closet beneath the stairs leading up to the old couple's bedroom, Benjamin's bedroom, with its store of apples in the corner, where his mother still takes the warming-pan to air his bed, when his father is not there to see. If this detailed description of the lay-out of the rooms is essential at this point to allow

the reader to understand the complex sequence of events when Benjamin returns to rob and assault his parents, Gaskell makes its inclusion appear natural, because it reinforces the image of the family's daily existence.

Gaskell's representation of the country in the short stories reveals the depth of her knowledge of country ways and is instinct with her profound sympathy with country people, from which her fictionalisation draws its strength. In turning to *Sylvia's Lovers* in the next chapter, I shall explore the extent to which there are resemblances between Gaskell's depiction of country life in the short stories and the novel, as well as considering the contrast in *Sylvia's Lovers* between life in the country and in the town.

### Notes

- 1 Gaskell, who greatly revered Wordsworth, did not meet him till the summer of 1849, the year before his death, at Lesketh How, through the good offices of his son-in-law, Edward Quillinan; she happily collected his autograph, one of the most precious in her collection. Cf. Uglow (1993), 232.
- 2 Gill (1998), Chapter 4 'The Poetry of Humble Life', 115-144
- 3 Uglow (1993), 102
- 4 I. Wiltshire, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Romanticism: The Romantic Inheritance and her Shorter Works', Ph.D., University of Salford, 2002. Wiltshire recognises likewise the influence of Crabbe, Coleridge, Goethe and, more debatably in my view, Blake, as well as, more marginally, Keats, Byron and Shelley (363).
- 5 'Martha Preston', in *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art*, 6 (1850), 133-138, (133). All further references are to this journal (*SUM*). In his exhaustive survey of Wordsworthian influences, Gill does not draw on 'Martha Preston', where, in my view, there may be some conscious imitation of Wordsworth. Gaskell's description of the child's garden, with its 'fading dandelions and daisies... and house-leek, and stone-crop, and moss, and travellers' joy' (133) seems to echo the description of Margaret's garden in 'The Wanderer', (*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de

Selincourt and H. Darbishire, 5 vols, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1949, vol. V, 'The Excursion' Book I, ll.722-729).

- 6 Gill (1998), 231.
- 7 In *The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories*, ed. S. Lewis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, 101-110, (101). All references are to this edition (MC).
- 8 A. Easson(1979), 211
- 9 In a letter of 1859 to Charles Bosanquet, Gaskell mentions briefly 'Miss Wordsworth's account of the two poor Greens who were lost in the snow'(GL571). Dorothy Wordsworth's manuscript has been edited by E. de Selincourt: *George & Sarah Green A Narrative*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1936. While Gaskell, in writing 'The Half-Brothers', was inspired by the broad outline of the Greens' story, there are only certain sections where there seems to be a relatively close parallel with Dorothy Wordsworth's account, most notably in the description of the wild moor in the snowstorm, which accords well with the situation of the Greens setting off late from Langdale and lost as they tried to make their way over the fell to Easedale. Interestingly though, the description of George Green's body being found beneath a crag down which he had fallen corresponds more closely with the setting where Susan Dixon finds Michael Hurst's body in 'Half a Life-Time Ago'. Harriet Martineau, in 'A Year at Ambleside', included in Barbara Todd's *Harriet Martineau at Ambleside*, Carlisle, Bookcase, 2002, 39-157, (114-116), likewise describes the death of 'a farmer and his wife' returning from Langdale. Martineau's version is much closer to Dorothy Wordsworth's account and since she was friendly with Mrs Davy of Lesketh How, it is probable that, like Gaskell, she borrowed the manuscript from her.
- 10 J.G.Sharps(1970), 87
- 11 GL 596. If the outline of the story of the Huntroyd parents forced to give evidence against their wayward son is founded in fact, the development of the story owes all to the power of Gaskell's creativity. It is interesting to note, however, that, compared with the Lakeland and Lancashire stories, she gives only the briefest indication of location: Nab End Farm is 'in the North Riding of Yorkshire', seemingly near Ripon. Could the reason for this be that Gaskell was less familiar with this region?
- 12 In *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, ed. Angus Easson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, 59-102. All references are to this edition (CP).
- 13 In *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, ed. S. Lewis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, 233- 247, (233). All references are to this edition (DNW).
- 14 In Gaskell's description of Mill Brow Farm, there is a marked parallel with that of the farm in 'Martha Preston':

This house, and perhaps forty acres of land..., formed the hereditary possessions of the Prestons, Westmoreland “statesmen”. For two hundred years, certainly, this nook of land had been theirs: and for nearly as long had that house been their habitation...(SUM 133).

As Gill(1998) points out, (129), Wordsworth had extolled the praises of the ‘statesmen’ in a letter of 1801 to Charles Fox (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2<sup>nd</sup> edit. rev. by Chester L Shaver, Oxford, Clarendon, 1967, 312-315). In two poems, “The Brothers” and “Michael”, he had attempted to draw a picture of ‘these small independent *proprietors* of land here called statesmen, men of respectable education who daily labour on their own properties.’ Wordsworth is concerned that ‘this class of men is rapidly disappearing’ and he urges the Whig politician to bear in mind that they are possessed of ‘our best qualities’.

- 15 Easson(1979) includes his discussion of ‘Cumberland Sheep-Shearers’ in his Chapter: ‘Miscellaneous Writings and the Letters’(229), which might appear to do less than justice to Gaskell’s fictional creativity in this piece.
- 16 From the letter which Gaskell wrote to Charles Bosanquet, it is clear that she was familiar with Keswick and Borrowdale and she mentions the ‘little picturesque primitive mountain village of Watendlath’ and the ‘wild hill path’ leading to it(GL 570). Whether ‘Cumberland Sheep-Shearers’ can, however, be taken as proof that the Gaskell family spent a holiday in the Keswick area, as Sharps assumes (171), is more doubtful. It is possible that Gaskell may have transposed the location of the sheep-shearing from a farm nearer Mrs Preston’s at Skelwith Bridge. In ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’, it is to be noted, she situates a sheep-shearing at Wythburne, ‘up beyond Grasmere’(CP 62).
- 17 In *The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories*(1995), 123-143, (124). All references are to this edition (MC).
- 18 In *Gothic Tales*, ed. Laura Kranzler, London, Penguin, 2000, 49-102, (49-50). All references are to this edition (GT).
- 19 The description of the setting is more effectively handled in ‘Half a Lifetime Ago’ than in the long opening section of ‘Martha Preston’, where Gaskell, writing for an American public, gives a detailed description of the Lakeland scenery in a walk from Skelwith Bridge along the south side of Loughrigg. In ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’, the farm is relocated to Oxenfell and the name of Martha Preston, which was that of the Gaskells’ landlady at Mill Brow Farm, is tactfully changed to Susan Dixon.  
Cf. Sharps(1970), 90 and 244-245. Cf., also, Larry K. Uffelman, ‘From ‘Martha Preston’ to ‘Half a Life-Time Ago’: Elizabeth Gaskell rewrites a story’, in *GSJ*, 17(2003), 92-103 (93-94).
- 20 In *The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories*(1995), 1-100, (1). All references are to this edition (MC).

- 21 Wiltshire(2002) sees an association with Wordsworth's poem, 'The Thorn', while acknowledging that Maggie Browne does not resemble the poor disorientated Martha Ray (199).
- 22 On the siting of the well of Pen-Morfa, cf. Dewi Williams, 'The Well of Pen-Morfa', in *Gaskell Society Newsletter*, September 1997, 3-5. Commenting on a Gaskell Society visit to the well, the Editor, Joan Leach, records thankfully: 'Nobody slipped on the stones'.
- 23 In *My Lady Ludlow and Other Stories*, ed. E. Wright, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, 335-348, (343). All references are to this edition(*MLL*).
- 24 In *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*(1981), 1-32, (6). All references are to this edition (*CP*).
- 25 In her Introduction (xii), Lewis comments on the 'similarities of name, characterization and plot' between Maggie Browne and her brother Edward and Maggie and Tom Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, written in 1860, some ten years after 'The Moorland Cottage'.
- 26 In *Gothic Tales* (2000), 227-270, (228). All references are to this edition (*GT*).
- It is interesting to note how similar the description of Hester's dress is to that of Lisbeth Bede in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, published in February 1858, just a few months earlier than 'The Crooked Branch':
- Lisbeth Bede...is an anxious, spare, yet vigorous old woman...her broad chest is covered with a buff neckerchief, and below this you see a sort of short bed-gown made of blue checkered linen, tied round the waist and descending to the hips, from which there is a considerable length of linsey-wolsey petticoat(*Adam Bede*, ed. V. Cunningham, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, 39).
- If Eliot merely invites the reader to view Lisbeth, Gaskell's description gains because Hester is seen through the eyes of the lover of her youth.

### The Country and the Town in *Sylvia's Lovers*

*Sylvia's Lovers*<sup>1</sup> was Gaskell's first major work to be written after *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and her experience in writing the latter work had an undoubted impact upon the novel. The story of *Sylvia's Lovers* seems to have originated in a visit which Gaskell paid to Whitby – the Monkshaven of the novel – in November 1859.<sup>2</sup> She was fascinated by the history of the town's whaling trade and the tales of the press-gangs in the 1790s. The fate of Daniel Robson, Sylvia's father, had its historical equivalent in the execution of one William Atkinson, hanged at York in 1793 as a riot leader; the two Quaker brothers, Jonathan and Joseph Sanders, whose shop and bank were still to be seen in Gaskell's day, were the originals of the Foster brothers and Darley was the name of an actual whaleman killed in the press-gang riots of 1793. Gaskell seems, almost playfully, to insert her own person into the final pages of the novel when a 'lady' goes to the 'Public Baths' and is told the story of 'Philip Hepburn and the legend of his fate' and of his wife, remembered as 'a pale, sad woman, allays dressed in black' (454). Nonetheless, there appears to be no historical basis for the tale of Sylvia Robson and her two lovers, the 'Specksioneer', Charley Kinraid, and her townsman cousin, Philip Hepburn. It could be argued, moreover, that in Sylvia's story there seems to be more than an echo of Crabbe's narrative poem 'Ruth'.<sup>3</sup> During her stay in Whitby, Gaskell wrote to George Eliot expressing her admiration for *Adam Bede*<sup>4</sup> and her portrayal of country life at times recalls Eliot's novel. For Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* was the 'the saddest story I ever wrote'<sup>5</sup> and illustrates the skill with which within a historical perspective Gaskell was

able to create a fictional tale of extraordinary poignancy and one in which the opposition between country and town is a fundamental element.

In writing *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell doubtless wished to avoid the *furor* which had arisen after the publication of the *Life* and so took pains to establish the historical accuracy of her account of life in the whaling port and the press-gang riots, sourcing her information from the accounts of local residents, particularly one John Corney, and consulting the *Annual Register* for 1793 and George Young's *History of Whitby* (2 vols, 1817).<sup>6</sup> It is significant, however, that the historical element does not dominate within the work, but is used to add authenticity to the fictional story.

As Shirley Foster indicates in her Introduction to *Sylvia's Lovers*(xiii), Gaskell, in common with other historical novelists in the early and mid-Victorian period, adopts a retrospective narrative framework. In writing of the regional society of north-east Yorkshire in the late eighteenth century, Gaskell tends to make generalized comments in a 'then' and 'now' approach and her authorial voice can seem condescending in its attitude towards the past: 'In looking back to the last century, it appears curious to see how little our ancestors had the power of putting two things together, and perceiving either the discord or the harmony thus produced'(66). Yet her comment on contemporary society is unquestionably ironic: 'It is well for us,' she declares, 'that we live at the present time, when everybody is logical and consistent'(ib.). With an awareness of the remoteness of Whitby – or Monkshaven – and the country around, she affirms: 'In the agricultural counties..., there is little analysis of motive or comparison of characters and actions, even at this present day of enlightenment.

Sixty or seventy years ago there was still less' (72). All the force of her irony comes into play, however, as she asserts:

But, taken as a general rule, it may be said that few knew what manner of men they were, compared to the numbers now who are fully conscious of their virtues, qualities, failings, and weaknesses, and who go about with a vivid self-consciousness that more than anything else deprives characters of freshness and originality' (*ib.*).

Importantly, Gaskell's generalizations are set within a context and are related to specific characters, in this instance, Sylvia Robson, Molly Corney, Philip Hepburn and Hester Rose, and so illustrate her sympathy for the instinctive naturalness of these people of a past era. Gaskell seems consciously to be addressing her observations towards her middle-class readership, contrasting the natural goodness of the country people of North Yorkshire and the more 'civilised' attitudes of the South of England. Her empathy with country people is evident: indeed, as Alan Shelston suggests in his Introduction to *Ruth*, for Gaskell country characters 'are somehow worthy *because* of the limiting nature of their provincialism'.<sup>7</sup> The reader may feel, however, that there is on occasion a certain ambivalence in Gaskell's attitude: on the one hand, we sense a truly Victorian – and Unitarian – belief in human progress, though admittedly one that is less marked than that of Eliot, and yet, on the other hand, her warmth towards the simple nature of the country people of the previous century and her niggling awareness of the shortcomings of the society of her day.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell presents a highly complex and multi-faceted portrait of the North Yorkshire society: the passionate seafaring breed of Daniel Robson and, from further north, the Corneys and Charley Kinraid, and Sylvia Robson, so much closer in spirit to her father than to her mother who is of solid Cumbrian farming stock, and the countryman Kester, the gruff good-hearted farm-servant; then, in



contrast, the different townspeople: the Quaker shopkeeper Foster brothers, their shopman, Philip Hepburn, and Alice and Hester Rose, as well as, to a lesser extent, the ordinary townsfolk, who, like Daniel Robson, are so spirited and ready to rise against the press-gangs. For Gaskell, it is Kester who epitomises the countryman's distrust of townsmen: 'Kester had an instinctive objection, a kind of natural antipathy such as has existed in all ages between the dwellers in a town and those in the country, between agriculture and trade'(168). The opposition between town and country lies at the heart of the tragedy of the novel in the country girl Sylvia's love for the sailor Kinraid and her inability to love her townsman cousin Philip whom through force of circumstances she will wed: town and country, each representing a differing ethos which will converge ultimately at the point of Philip's death.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell, with her social historian's eye, seeks to recreate the life of over sixty years before. In the opening pages of *Ruth*, she had already made evident the association between details of everyday life and character: 'The traditions of those bygone times, even to the smallest social particular, enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character'(2). So it is that in *Sylvia's Lovers*, she makes recurring references to significant features of daily life: the salt tax (repealed in 1825), the 'high-priced tea', the dearness of candles, affecting both the farming Robsons and the relatively poor townspeople, Alice and Hester Rose, and the 'home-spinning' in the Robsons' home, Bell with her larger wheel for wool and Sylvia with her smaller wheel for flax. For the present day reader, it may be difficult to identify which country customs were no longer prevalent in Gaskell's day and, indeed, as in the short stories, such as 'Half a Life-Time Ago', we are tempted to assume that there is in Gaskell's account a degree of 'temporal

fluidity'. Yet Gaskell's insistence on certain features suggests that they may well have been of a past era. Historical local colour, moreover, is not introduced fortuitously but carefully incorporated into the fictional account: the reference to the custom of hiring servants on All Souls' Day stems from the prudent Philip's concern that Daniel Robson should have taken his daughter to the 'Admiral's Head' and involved her in the 'rough piece of rustic gaiety' of the farm hands and maidservants after the hiring(117-118). The itinerant tailor Donkin's visit to Haytersbank farm is woven into a whole episode of domestic farm life, allowing for insight into the characters: Daniel, ill-tempered with his rheumatics, the shrewdly tolerant Bell and Sylvia herself, hanging on every word of Donkin's description of Kinraid's action during the press-gang raid on the whaling ship. Gaskell's account of the New Year's party at the Corneys' Moss Brow Farm is a veritable *tour de force*, with its description of the farmhouse kitchen, the supper and the traditional party games.

If Gaskell uses references to local customs to reinforce the realism of her story, she is equally careful to reproduce authentically the Yorkshire dialect. Her interest in dialect was already well established: within the fifth edition of *Mary Barton*, published in 1854, she incorporated William Gaskell's two lectures on the Lancashire dialect.<sup>8</sup> In writing *Sylvia's Lovers*, she consulted a recognised authority on Yorkshire dialect, General Perronet Thompson of Hull, making changes from the manuscript to the first and later editions.<sup>9</sup> While in her earlier novels and short stories, she had been, in general, fairly cautious in her use of dialect, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, on the other hand, she uses dialect widely to reinforce the realism of her portrayal of North Yorkshire society, and that not merely in the speech of such figures as the farm labourer Kester and the poor townswoman Alice Rose, but in the principal

characters of the novel: Daniel and Bell Robson, Sylvia herself and, in a more refined townsman's version, Philip Hepburn. The farm servant Kester's speech is the broadest dialect of all and seems to embody his good-hearted directness, as when, in his very first words in the novel, he accepts to seek out tailor Donkin for Sylvia: 'T'ool's a vast o' muck in 't, an' a thowt as a'd fettle it, an' do it up; but a reckon a mun do yo'r biddin' (48). As in 'The Crooked Branch', which was also set in North Yorkshire, Gaskell captures the picturesque imagery of country dialect. Daniel Robson succinctly sums up the difference between Sylvia and himself, and his wife and Philip, who were of Preston stock: 'Thee an' me lass, is Robsons – oat-cake folk, while they's pie-crust' (124). The townswoman Alice Rose's speech is equally direct, as she rounds on Philip for bringing his snowy feet into her kitchen: 'Look the' there! Droppin' and drippin' along t' flags as was cleaned last night, and meddlin' wi' the woman's work as a man has no business wi'' (146). Gaskell's use of dialect not only enhances the regional authenticity of the novel but is also a vital tool of characterisation. In the tradition of Wordsworth with his more stylised 'rustic speech', Gaskell, like Eliot, implies that regional dialect epitomises the very spirit of country people.

In the opening chapter of *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell establishes the contrast between town and country, between the whaling port of Monkshaven and the countryside of its hinterland, with the constant presence of the sea. The description of Monkshaven, with the wild moors beyond, is reminiscent of Gaskell's celebrated account of the journey from Keighley up to Haworth at the beginning of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and, to a lesser extent, the opening of *Ruth*. In her opening description of Monkshaven, she only briefly evokes certain key physical features of the town – the

monastery ruins on the cliffs, the main street with its smaller lanes struggling up the hillside, the bridge across the Dee – before turning to the socio-economic basis of the town, its past dependence on the whaling trade. From the stance of a social historian, Gaskell seems intrigued by the relatively egalitarian system of apprenticeship for the whaling ships and the pattern of the young boys' lives, as she is by the 'stately mansions' of the rich shipowners on the south side of the river. Yet, ironically, the townspeople who figure within the novel have little direct connection with the sea, but are associated with the mercantile trade: the shopkeeper and banker Foster brothers, Philip Hepburn and Alice and Hester Rose. It may be assumed that Gaskell needed to create in Philip Hepburn the solid shopman who for Sylvia would have none of the glamour of the seafaring Kinraid.

In turning to the surrounding countryside, Gaskell adds a personal force to her description:

I have said that the country for miles all around was moorland; high above the level of the sea towered the purple crags, whose summits were crowned with greensward that stole down the sides of the scaur a little way in grassy veins. Here and there a brook forced its way from the heights down to the sea... And in moorland hollows, as in these valleys, trees and underwood grew and flourished; so that, while on the bare swells of the high land you shivered at the waste desolation of the scenery, when you dropped into these wooded 'bottoms' you were charmed with the nestling shelter which they gave(8-9).

We have the impression that it is Gaskell's sharp eye which on her November visit has spotted 'the little black-faced sheep' and the 'small stacks of coarse poor hay' and the 'larger stacks of turf for winter fuel in the farmyards' and 'the cattle look[ing] half-starved'. The desolate moors with their isolated farms, so reminiscent of the moors above Haworth, might seem to have little place in the novel as a whole, but they emphasise Monkshaven's remoteness from the outside world: Philip sets off into self-imposed exile across those same 'desolate brown moors' with the 'wild black

cattle' looking after him 'with their great blank puzzled eyes'(353). In contrast to the moors, the 'rare green dales', the 'bottoms', offer 'comparative fertility and luxuriance'(9): this is the countryside of the Robsons' Haytersbank Farm and the Corneys' Moss Brow,<sup>10</sup> though even here 'the piping sea-winds, following the current of the stream, stunted and cut low any trees; but still there was rich thick underwood, tangled and tied together with brambles, and brier-rose, and honeysuckle'(10).

From her description of the countryside, Gaskell returns almost brusquely to her theme: the constant presence of the sea and its impact on local life: 'for twenty miles inland there was no forgetting the sea, nor the sea-trade'(*ib.*). In the course of the novel the sea is always in the hearts and minds of the characters. Daniel Robson can never forget his whaling days; Kinraid's attraction for Sylvia is that of the free-spirited seafarer; Sylvia, even after her marriage, is constantly drawn to the sea and the cliffs of Monkshaven. But the sea, because of the presence of the press-gangs, is also a deadly menace and its influence is felt at pivotal points in the novel: from the seashore Philip witnesses Kinraid's seizure and then fails to pass on his message to Sylvia, just as, after his return, he is mortally wounded as he saves little Bella from drowning in the sea. The trichotomy of sea, town and country is reflected in the three main characters: Sylvia and her two lovers, Kinraid and Philip Hepburn. Yet the two ways of life which form the substance of the novel are those of the town and the country: of Monkshaven, with Philip Hepburn, the Foster brothers and Alice and Hester Rose, and of the country, with the Robsons of Haytersbank and, to a lesser extent, the Corneys of Moss Brow. It is, moreover, Gaskell's portrayal of country life which, for the greater part of the work, gives the novel its essential dynamism. In the last third of the novel, the dullness of Sylvia's town life is the backcloth against which

she struggles to come to terms with her marriage and, after the drama of Kinraid's return, Philip's disappearance.

In considering Gaskell's depiction of the country in *Sylvia's Lovers*, I shall look first at her use of the countryside as setting, before turning to her characterisation of the principal figures and their interrelationships and then to the analysis of certain key techniques. In the final section, I shall consider the contrast between town and country, particularly in relation to Sylvia's life after her marriage.

As in the short stories, the country setting is a key element in the life of the characters. Gaskell's description of Haytersbank may seem to lack the visual immediacy of her description of Yew Nook Farm in 'Half a Life-Time Ago' or of the Haworth parsonage in the *Life*, but the farm represents a gentle haven sheltered from the winds:

The farmhouse lay in the shelter of a very slight green hollow scarcely scooped out of the pasture field by which it was surrounded; the short crisp turf came creeping up to the very door and windows, without any attempt at a yard or garden, or any nearer enclosure of the buildings than the stone dyke that formed the boundary of the field itself. The buildings were long and low, in order to avoid the rough violence of the winds that swept over that wild, bleak spot, both in winter and summer' (37).

Every detail is in its place: 'the short crisp turf creeping up to the very door and windows' takes on a life of its own, enveloping the farmhouse so that it merges into its surroundings. Each element of the farm's setting is like a *leit-motiv* recurring in the course of the novel: the green knoll from which Bell Robson so often watches for Sylvia's return, the 'dry, hard footpath' tacking across the field, down which Kester spots the constables coming to arrest Daniel, the 'long bleak lane, full of round rough stones' with its stile, where Sylvia encounters Kinraid on his return, and the Haytersbank gully leading down to the sea, from which Philip sees Kinraid emerging

on the fateful day when he is press-ganged. I would suggest, moreover, that Gaskell's unusual word order – the 'dry hard footpath' and the 'round rough stones' – attracts the reader's attention, giving the description a special emphasis.

If the setting of the farm is windswept, Gaskell emphasises the warmth and orderliness of the interior of the farmhouse, which is Bell Robson's domain and 'Mrs Robson', interposes Gaskell, 'was a Cumberland woman, and as such, was a cleaner housewife than the farmers' wives of that north-eastern coast' (37-38). Interestingly, Gaskell gives no details of the furnishing of the kitchen, though she will do so later, for, as in the short stories, the kitchen is the focus of farm life. Initially, she dwells instead on the features which reflect Bell's housewifely skills and warm hospitality: the 'great rack of clap-bread', the flitches of bacon and 'hands' of cured pork and, for the visitor, 'turf cakes' and 'singing hinnies' and 'high-priced tea'. For Gaskell, there is an inherent association between Bell's home-making skills and the moral fibre of her character. In *Bell* she celebrates the Victorian values of domesticity and homeliness which are strongly associated here with the country way of life.

Gaskell uses the contrast between Haytersbank and the Corneys' farm, Moss Brow, to establish the difference in temperament between the two families. Moss Brow 'was but a disorderly, comfortless place' (56). 'You' – and Gaskell brings the reader nearer – 'had to cross a dirty farmyard, all puddles and dungheaps, on stepping-stones, to get to the door of the house-place' (56-57). So different from the orderliness of Bell Robson's household, in Mrs Corney's kitchen there were always wet clothes hanging up to dry from a 'dab-wash', because they had been forgotten on the regular washday. Gaskell could not have found a more telling image to convey the slovenly housewife

and yet there seems indulgent humour in her description rather than any harsher criticism. There is a natural beauty, too, in the Corneys' wild orchard:

It was full of old gnarled apple-trees, their trunks covered with gray lichen, in which the cunning chaffinch built her nest in spring-time. The cankered branches remained on the trees...; the grass grew in long tufts, and was wet and tangled underfoot. There was a tolerable crop of rosy apples still hanging on the gray old trees, and here and there they showed ruddy in the green bosses of untrimmed grass' (58).<sup>11</sup>

Despite man's neglect, nature is fruitful. Since the Corney family's maxim was: 'Do nothing to-day that you can put off till to-morrow' (*ib.*), the windfalls would lie there till the 'lads' wanted pies for their supper. With a touch of gentle humour, Gaskell finds a trivial detail to epitomise the farming family's casual existence.

Gaskell's description of the country seashore, as Philip strides out towards Hartlepool, reflects all the cheerful buoyancy of his mood:

Philip walked on pretty briskly, unconsciously enjoying the sunny landscape before him; the crisp curling waves rushing almost up to his feet, on his right hand, and then swirling back over the fine small pebbles into the great swelling sea (197).

As Frances Twinn points out,<sup>12</sup> Gaskell is familiar with the topography of the broken Whitby coast-line: the cliffs, the green gullies, 'the sudden falls of brown and red soil or rock deepening to a yet greater richness of colour at their base' (197). Gaskell uses landscape features, moreover, to move the narrative forward: at first Philip feels that the 'barrier of rocks' shuts him off from 'the cares of the land', but then, after he has seen Kinraid, it provides him with a shelter behind which he can hide: the lightness of his step has gone and now the jugged points of the rocks and the slippery seaweed impede his advance.<sup>13</sup>

As in *Ruth* and in the short stories, the seasons and the weather form a significant element of Gaskell's setting, which she associates closely with the frame of mind of



her characters. Doubtless Gaskell has in mind the rainy, windswept days of her November visit to Whitby, as she describes the winds swirling in off the North Sea. It is the 'constant drizzle... filling the air with fine gray mist until people breathed more water than air'(46) which brings on Daniel Robson's rheumatics, making him tetchy and ill-tempered. On leaving the Corneys' New Year's party in utter despondency, Philip makes his way back to Monkshaven in the teeth of the biting wind: 'the cold sleet almost blinded him as the sea-wind drove it straight into his face'(143); as with the young boy in 'The Half-Brothers', the snow falling thick and fast masks the features of the landscape, echoing his sense of desolation. Nature can, however, contrast cruelly with the mood of the characters: it is on a bright April afternoon, with 'little sailing white clouds catching the pleasant sunlight', the lark singing 'poised high up in the sunny air' and the bleating of lambs, when 'everything inanimate was full of hope and gladness'(287-288) that the sad little cortege of Bell Robson, Sylvia and Philip comes down the little path to the farm, returning after Daniel's execution.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, the country characters such as the Robson family and their friends seem at one with their setting, as, indeed, are the townspeople, like Philip Hepburn and the Foster brothers. In establishing the character of her heroine, Sylvia Robson, Gaskell uses a relatively slight episode down by the riverside to encapsulate the personality of the young girl, but she also subtly incorporates details to emphasise differences in lifestyle between country and town. The two farmer's daughters, Sylvia and her friend, Molly Corney, are on their way to market with their butter and eggs and, having walked barefoot, go down to wash their feet in the river before putting on their shoes and stockings for the town. While Molly sits demurely on the grassy bank, Sylvia leaps onto a stone mid-stream, 'dipping her little rosy toes in the

cool rushing water and whisking them out with childish glee'(16). This fleeting image conveys all of Sylvia's high spirits and youthful insouciance – and gives a sense of Gaskell's own indulgence towards her heroine. Like Ruth, the heroine of Gaskell's earlier novel, Sylvia is essentially a country girl, but in a quite different way. Ruth's love of the countryside is linked to her empathy with the natural world: in North Wales she lives, breathes, feels the countryside and this affinity with nature seems an expression of her sensuality. Sylvia shares with Ruth a love of nature, the flowers in the hedgerows, the autumn sky tinged with pink glimpsed through the apple boughs in the Corneys' orchard, and above all the sea, irrevocably associated in her mind with her lost love Kinraid. Yet all her vitality – and this is where she is so different from Ruth – seems to stem from her busy life as a farmer's daughter, assisting her mother in the dairy and with the daily round of household duties and especially outside of the house, helping Kester with the milking and proud that she can handle Black Nell better than he. It is all this bustling activity which she misses so profoundly in the passive existence which she leads as Philip's wife in Monkshaven.

*Sylvia's Lovers* is a novel of opposites and this is nowhere more marked than with Sylvia's parents, Daniel and Bell Robson. For Gaskell, Daniel Robson epitomises the spirit of the 'wild north-eastern people': he has been 'sailor, smuggler, horse-dealer, and farmer in turns; a sort of fellow possessed by a spirit of adventure and love of change which', as Gaskell comments wryly, 'did him and his own family more harm than anybody else'(37). His impulsive, passionate nature revels in stories of his whaling past: if he is attracted by Charley Kinraid, it is quite simply that the dashing young 'specksioneer' is the man Daniel would long to be. His is a man's world and

he feels scorn for the shopman Philip Hepburn: 'thou'rt little better nor a woman, for sure, bein' mainly acquaint wi' ribbons'(192). Daniel sees himself as the master in his own house, surveying the kitchen from his 'master's chair' in the chimney corner; yet he is also tender-hearted and ever indulgent towards Sylvia and so gently concerned for his sick wife, as he sits with her by the fireside, recalling their courting days. As Foster points out in her Introduction(xvi-xvii), it is the countryman's 'anarchic individualism' which leads him to defy the authority of central government: as he tells Philip, 'Nation here! nation there! I'm a man and yo're another, but nation's nowhere'(42). His obsessive hatred of the press-gangs dominates his nature and leads him to incite the rioters to take vengeance. As Louise Henson indicates,<sup>14</sup> moreover, Gaskell, in her portrayal of Daniel Robson, was influenced by the pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories of the Unitarian physiologist, William B Carpenter. As she suggests, Daniel Robson's 'moral nature, appropriately, is that of the 'primitive' and uneducated mind, the impulsive reaction to injustice'(ib). Indeed, Gaskell, herself, insisted on a 'physiological explanation of what afterwards was spoken of as a supernatural kind of possession leading to his doom'(233). The violence of the destructive force within Daniel Robson seems more strongly individualistic than John Barton's loathing of the mill-owners, which is set firmly within the context of social oppression. Daniel's irrational obsession and his blindly obstinate refusal to recant are wholly consistent with his fierce individualism.

In contrast to her husband, Bell Robson is a woman of steady common sense; she is, after all, a Cumberland woman, a 'Preston o' Slaideburn', and from the correspondence and short stories we know of Gaskell's predilection for what she considered to be the sterling qualities of Cumbrian farmers' wives. Indeed, as she

wryly admits, Bell's 'only want of practical wisdom consisted in taking Farmer Robson for a husband'(37). Through Bell Robson, Gaskell emphasises the established order of rural society in Bell's unquestioning regard for her husband's authority, or, as Gaskell suggests with an ironic smile, for the 'superior intellect of the masculine gender'(118). As Bell warns Sylvia, 'Na, na!' th' feyther's feyther, and we mun respect him'(47), though in a rare glimpse of opposition to her husband, she rues his refusal to send Sylvia to school and urges her daughter to learn to read. If Bell is 'good and sensible', she is 'not a woman of resources'(*ib*): she lacks Sylvia's imagination and instinctive intelligence. Bell is intensely protective of her only daughter and, favouring her steady nephew's courtship, is suspicious of the 'specksioneer' Kinraid's intentions. Gaskell draws a touching picture of the farmer's wife seeking to warn Sylvia with the sad tale of the jilted Nancy Hartley. Bell's face is drawn by illness and she wears her 'buff kerchief' and 'Sunday woollen gown of dark blue'(173) rather than the workaday 'bed-gown' and even her knitting lies idly beside her. Sadly, Bell cannot tell whether Sylvia has taken the story as a 'caution' for herself, which reinforces the anxious mother's sense of helplessness.

Gaskell lends reality to her portrait of the countrywoman by showing how Bell clings to the simple objects of her everyday existence, when, with her husband's arrest, she loses the mainstay of her existence and sinks into physical and emotional decline, becoming increasingly dependent on her daughter. As she leaves for Monkshaven to see Daniel before he is taken to York prison, she seizes her husband's 'red woollen comforter as he's allays slept in this twelvemonth past' as well as 'a bit o' peppermint cake; he's main and fond on it '(272-273), in her desperate need to find comfort for her husband. When Bell is quite irrationally convinced that her husband will return

home, she insists on setting on the potatoes and having Sylvia and Kester sit down for their dinner well ahead of time. The poignancy of Bell's pathetic state is seen in its impact on Sylvia, who, like Susan Dixon, in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', finds relief in the hard task of making 'clap-bread'. Gaskell uses these simple activities to convey her characters' anguished state of mind and in so doing engages the sympathy of the reader. When, with Sylvia's marriage, Bell has to leave the countryside to live in Monkshaven, she becomes totally disorientated, sinking into what Gaskell terms 'childishness'. Sylvia's tender concern for her mother is seen in contrast to her impatience with her husband, Philip.

With the farming family of Daniel, Bell and Sylvia Robson at the very core of the novel, it is in their farm-servant Kester that Gaskell offers her most complete portrait of a farm labourer. Interestingly his name is the same as Eliot's 'old Kester' in *Adam Bede*, though Gaskell's delineation of the character is much fuller – and less patronising – than that of Eliot.<sup>15</sup> Kester epitomises the countryman, with his mistrust of townspeople, not least Philip Hepburn who dares to pay court to Sylvia, 'the meyster's daughter', for whom Kester feels such 'loving faithful admiration' (48). The association between Sylvia and Kester is one of the most unusual in Gaskell's fictional writing. The relationships between young country women and their female servants are not infrequent in her novels and short stories: we can think of Peggy's touching and lasting loyalty to Susan Dixon in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', of Maggie Browne and the servant Nancy in 'The Moorland Cottage', of the rather more equivocal relationship between Ruth and the Bensons' servant Sally and of the eminently practical Betty in *Cousin Phillis*. In Kester, however, Gaskell develops much more fully the relationship between the young mistress and the farm-servant.

Though Kester observes strictly the social hierarchy, between Sylvia and him there is understanding, even complicity.

Gaskell makes Kester a leading figure in one of the most telling scenes of farm life, the milking sequence in the shippen, when Charley Kinraid attempts to pay court to Sylvia. This episode recalls the dairy scene between Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*. In Eliot's novel, the coquettish Hetty is well aware of the impact of her kittenish charm on Donnithorne, whereas Sylvia is shy and naïve, hardly able to believe that she can attract Kinraid. In this scene, Kester is both a key participant and a shrewd observer: though he pretends to be absorbed in milking Black Nell, 'his eyes and ears', as Gaskell dryly observes, 'were both vigilant' (166). It is, in fact, Kester who directs the scene, as Kinraid finds himself obliged to discuss the cows, when he wants no more than to talk with Sylvia; yet it is Kester who prolongs the milking, the 'stripping' of the 'afterings', to allow the young couple to talk, as he sizes up Kinraid. As Sylvia gains confidence, assuming her familiar role of dairymaid and deftly carrying the milk-pails over the slippery stones to the dairy, Kester cannot but help expressing in his cowman's language all his admiration for her, seeming to imply his approval of Kinraid's suit: 'She's a good wench – a good wench as iver was – an' come on a good stock, an' that's summat, whether in a cow or a woman' (169).

The relationship between Sylvia and Kester evolves significantly in the course of the novel. After Daniel's death and with Bell's decline, Kester assumes an almost paternal role with Sylvia. When Sylvia cannot find the words to admit her engagement, he warns her with more truth than he can know: 'But dunnot go and

marry a man as thou's noane taken wi', and another as is most like for t' be dead, but who mebbe, is alive, havin' a pull on thy heart'(297). After Sylvia's marriage and then Philip's disappearance, Kester reminds Sylvia that he is 'thy only friend'(367), always respectful, always supportive and representing for her the one durable element of her youthful happiness. In her portrait of Kester, Gaskell seems to extend beyond the individual to a more generalized picture of the farm labourer's life, conveying, not without a touch of sentiment, the hardness of Kester's lot and the force of his attachment to the Robsons, who had become his surrogate family: the time of Kester's service at Haytersbank 'had, on the whole, been the happiest in all his long monotonous years of daily labour'; Sylvia's father had treated him 'with the rough kindness of fellowship' and her mother had 'never stinted him in his meat or grudged him his share of the best that was going' and Sylvia herself became 'the great centre of the faithful herdsman's affections'(426-427). Gaskell's sympathy with the farming family and their relationship with their manservant is clearly evident.

In turning to certain of Gaskell's realist techniques in her portrayal of country life, I shall consider first of all her use of details of physical appearance and dress, seen in relation to country life, but significant, also, in terms of the delineation of character. Gaskell's descriptions, moreover, are rarely static but depict the character engaged in an activity and, as with the description of Hester Rose in the opening of 'The Crooked Branch', are often viewed through the eyes of another character. The picture of Sylvia coming down the stairs in her workaday attire suggests all the freshness and beauty of the archetypal country girl. Yet the image of Sylvia is used primarily by Gaskell to show its impact upon Philip who watches and waits:

First, the little pointed toe came daintily into sight, then the trim ankle in the tight blue stocking...; then the full brown stuff petticoat, the arm holding the petticoat

back in decent folds, so as not to encumber the descending feet; the slender neck and shoulders hidden under the folded square of fresh white muslin; the crowning beauty of the soft innocent face radiant in colour, and with the light brown curls clustering around(119).

The power of the description rests in the sense of Philip's expectation and in the sensual arousal which is implied. Sylvia presents a demure figure, but Gaskell hints at – and Philip feels – the attraction of the young girl's body beneath the decency of her attire. Within Gaskell's seemingly staid young shopman lies all the force of his latent sensuality.

Kinraid's more experienced eye is also seen watching Sylvia, as she bustles in and out of the kitchen, out of the shade into the 'broad firelight':

She wore the high-crowned linen cap of that day, surmounting her lovely masses of golden brown hair, rather than concealing them, and tied firm to her head by a broad blue ribbon. A long curl hung down each side of her neck – her throat rather, for her neck was concealed by a little spotted handkerchief carefully pinned across the waist of her brown stuff gown(94).

The interest of Gaskell's description lies initially in the fact that Sylvia is being observed by Kinraid, but then Gaskell veers towards Sylvia's own feelings and the significance for her of her dress: her youthful vanity that she had 'doffed her bed-gown and linsey-woolsey petticoat, her working-dress, and made herself smart in her stuff gown' (*ib.*). In the milking episode in the shippen, Sylvia is again preoccupied with her dress, as she knits away vigorously, regretting that 'she had not put on a better gown, or even a cap with brighter button'(166). Gaskell's voice intervenes, however, to indicate how mistaken Sylvia was because of her attractiveness in her working attire and its appropriateness to her situation:

how very pretty she looked standing against the faint light, her head a little bent down; her hair catching bright golden touches, as it fell from under her little linen cap; her pink bed-gown, confined by her apron-string, giving a sort of easy grace to her figure; her dark full linsey petticoat short above her trim ankles(167).



When, after her marriage, Sylvia lives in the town, her attitude towards her dress has changed, as she finds it 'a hardship to leave off her country dress, her uncovered hair, her linsey petticoat, and loose bed-gown, and to don a stiff and stately gown for her morning dress'(311). This difference in attire and her enforced idleness epitomise for Sylvia her loss of freedom of spirit and all the bustling activity of her life as a farmer's daughter.

Gaskell uses two recurring symbols associated with the countryside to link Philip's shopman's life and his love for his country cousin Sylvia. Philip's New Year's gift to Sylvia, carefully selected from the drapery stock, is 'a ribbon with a little briar-rose pattern running upon it'(126), which for him seems to embody Sylvia herself: the briar-rose with its 'sweetness and thorns' and 'the soft green ground', which with 'the pink and brown pattern' would show off her complexion. At the thought of her wearing it, moreover, he feels as if she would belong to him. But, ironically, it is this very ribbon which will be claimed by Kinraid as a forfeit and which Philip will see in Kinraid's hat lying on the sea-shore after his capture by the press-gang, which disastrously intensifies Philip's jealousy and so has impact on the story-line.

Similarly, Philip associates his idea of Sylvia with his memory of a little pigeon which he used to observe from the window of Alice Rose's garret: 'The pigeon would sit in one particular place, sunning herself, and puffing out her feathered breast, with all the blue and rose-coloured lights gleaming in the morning rays, cooing softly to herself as she dressed her plumage'(305-306). Philip transmutes the image drawn from the natural world into an element in his shopman's existence, seeing the same colours in a piece of shot silk, which he offers to Sylvia for her wedding dress, though, tellingly, Sylvia refuses to leave off her mourning for her wedding day.

When Sylvia, out of kindness, accepts that it should be made into a dress for herself at Bella's christening, Philip is overjoyed, reading more depth of feeling in Sylvia's acceptance than is truly there. 'Perhaps on that day', interposes Gaskell, 'Philip reached the zenith of his life's happiness'(321). Thus the pigeon, which Philip identifies with his love for Sylvia, is seen by him in the colours of the shot silk, which Gaskell uses as a recurring image to mark the evolution of Philip and Sylvia's relationship.

With extraordinary concision in cameo sketches of country figures, Gaskell has the ability to convey a whole personality in a deft stroke or two, often in association with dialectal speech. As Sylvia watched out for the itinerant tailor, 'Harry Donkin's bow-legs were seen circling down the path to the house door'(49). The tailor's bow-legs seem humorously disembodied; yet they also reflect his way of life, the long hours spent cross-legged at his trade. At the New Year's Eve party, Farmer Corney has no thought of relinquishing his master's seat in the chimney corner and, we are told, if he has paid his friends the compliment of shaving on a weekday and putting on his Sunday coat, beyond that he will not go: 'Them as doesn't like t' see me i' my work-a-day wescut and breeches may bide away'(130), he declares, and before eight o'clock he is upstairs to bed, having arranged with his wife that she will bring up to him 'about two pounds of spiced beef, and a hot tumbler of stiff grog'(131). Gaskell's picture of Farmer Corney has humour but also reveals a warmth of sympathy for the direct countryman.

Gaskell creates the same sense of vitality in the images of Kester when, after Sylvia's marriage, he brings a breath of country air into her sterile town existence. On his first

visit, Kester is daunted by the unfamiliar environment of her parlour, but the picture of countryman standing stiffly, wine glass in hand, to wish her well with the words of the old sanding song,<sup>16</sup> strikes an immediate chord with the reader, for though he claims to be 'tongue-teed when a come to want my words most'(315), once launched he is not at a loss for words and his true sentiments seep through in his direct country speech. At Bell Robson's funeral, it is the sight of 'Kester, in his country clothes, with a bit of new crape round his hat, crying as if his heart would break over the coffin of his good, kind mistress'(363) which unleashes all Sylvia's pent up emotions so that she breaks down in sobs. Gaskell uses the physical details of the countryman's appearance and his distress to indicate the impact of his presence on Sylvia. She creates the same sense of visual reality allied to insight into character when Kester comes to visit Sylvia, after Mrs Kinraid's visit: 'He had dressed himself in his Sunday best, and although it was only Thursday, had forestalled his Sunday's shaving; he had provided a bag of humbugs for the child...' (427). Kester's neat appearance conveys all his respect for his mistress and the bag of humbugs his thoughtful affection for her child. His amazement at Mrs Kinraid's visit is betrayed as he drops the bag of humbugs, all to little Bella's advantage. The vitality of these sketches of the countryman Kester contrasts forcibly with the drab reality of Sylvia's town life. For Sylvia, Kester brings back the lost world of her youth, with the comforting reassurance of his presence and respectful affection for her.

In her description of the New Year's Eve party at the Corneys, Gaskell describes with an extraordinary force of realism the traditional country event and, significantly, uses this setting to show the evolution of the feelings and interrelationship of the three main protagonists: Sylvia, herself, Charley Kinraid and Philip Hepburn. Gaskell's

description of the Moss Brow farmhouse is strongly reminiscent of that of the farmhouse in 'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers', seen equally well on the occasion of a rural festivity. Gaskell conveys the same sense of historical continuity: 'the large old flagged parlour', with its 'state bed' where the births and deaths of the family take place, 'the patchwork curtains and coverlet' with 'costly Indian chintzes and palempours intermixed with the commoner black and red calico', representing 'the united efforts of some former generation of the family' (127). As in 'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers', a splendid repast has been prepared, with, as Bessy Corney boasts to Sylvia, 'above half a hundred-weight o' butcher's meat, besides pies and custards' (129). While in the short story Gaskell portrays the farmer's wife as being full of genuine good-heartedness, as she proudly pours out her green and black tea, Mrs Corney is seen as being determined to make a display of her munificence, though intending all the while to gauge the strength of the 'high-priced tea' by the relative importance of the guests. With Farmer Corney stumping off to bed promptly at eight o'clock, Gaskell's description of the Corney family is not without a touch of mildly satirical humour.

Within her description of the New Year's Eve party, Gaskell uses the visual evidence of various incidents and details of physical appearance, gesture, regard, even position within the room, to show characters' feelings and the evolution of the relationship between Kinraid and Sylvia and the growing isolation of the townsman Philip, who feels uncomfortable in this unfamiliar setting with 'the young farmers with whom [he] had nothing in common' (132) and looks on as a hapless observer. At the beginning of the evening, Sylvia is a young girl, flustered and ill at ease at finding herself the centre of attraction, and by the end of the evening, she has grown into a young woman

aware of her appeal for Kinraid. Sylvia's agitation is betrayed when she spills tea on her gown and, when Kinraid seeks to engage in conversation, Sylvia's shyness is shown as, head-down, she plays with her apron-strings, feeling embarrassed at her inability to make conversation. In the game of forfeits, Sylvia demurely refuses to allow the 'candlestick' Kinraid his forfeit of a kiss, but when she tearfully escapes to the parlour, she is followed by Kinraid and it is a quietly assured Sylvia who steals back into the kitchen a little later on. Throughout the evening, the experienced Kinraid pays court to Sylvia, though even he is daunted by her ingenuousness. Though cheered by Sylvia's refusal to kiss Kinraid, Philip, in fact, misconstrues the true nature of her feelings and when he overhears Molly Brunton's joking wager that Kinraid has kissed Sylvia, he instantly recognises the truth in Sylvia's and Kinraid's expressions. Philip is marginalized further when, having been obliged to join the older people at the first sitting of supper, he finds himself physically trapped between the benches and the wall and forced to witness at the young people's second sitting the animated conversation between Sylvia and Kinraid and their growing intimacy. Within the realism of her description of the country festivity, Gaskell uses largely visual evidence to illustrate the growing bond between Sylvia and Kinraid and the pathetic isolation of Philip.

For the greater part of *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell appears to direct the reader's attention towards the countryside, with her description of the life of the Robson family and Sylvia's burgeoning love for Kinraid and her disdain for her townsman cousin Philip. Yet Gaskell carefully counterbalances this depiction of rural existence by the breadth of her portrayal of life in Monkshaven: the topography of the town with its streets huddled around the harbour and marketplace, and the whole atmosphere of the place,

with the constant threat of the press-gangs; in particular, she dwells upon the lives of Philip Hepburn and the tradesmen Foster brothers and Alice and Hester Rose. In this depiction of town life, there are episodes which seem to owe their animation to the same realist techniques which we find in the portrayal of country life. We can call to mind the vehemence of Alice Rose's blunt speech as she rounds on her lodgers, Philip and William Coulson, and Jonathan and Jeremiah Foster's masterly exposition of their partnership proposals to their two daunted shopmen, Philip and William. Yet, on the whole, Gaskell's account of town life is relatively subdued and lacks the buoyancy of her description of life in the countryside. In contrast to the animation in her descriptions of Sylvia, Gaskell's picture of the townsman Philip is of a grey being, middle-aged before his time:

He was a serious-looking young man, tall, but with a slight stoop in his shoulders, brought on by his occupation. He had thick hair standing off from his forehead in a peculiar but not unpleasing manner; a long face, with a slightly aquiline nose, dark eyes, and a long upper lip, which gave a disagreeable aspect to a face that might otherwise have been good-looking(28).

Gaskell's account of Philip's growing ambition at the prospect of partnership and his careful service of his masters' interests in his London mission gives insight into the townsman's personality, but seems consciously low-key, lacking the vitality of the episodes of country life. Yet Gaskell has carefully set all in place for when the focus of the novel moves from the country to the town, with Sylvia's marriage to Philip. If to this point Gaskell's picture of life in Monkshaven has ranged over a number of characters, she now centres on Sylvia and her struggle to come to terms with her marriage and the vicissitudes of her subsequent existence.

If Gaskell indicates the influence of the countryside in the lives of the Robsons and their associates, so, too, she emphasises the impact upon Sylvia of the physical

environment of the town and her deep sense of deprivation at the loss of all that country life represented for her. During her engagement, Sylvia already senses with foreboding the immense change which her marriage to Philip and her new life in the town will represent. The house behind the shop is associated with painful memories: it was to the Fosters' parlour that she was taken fainting on the day of the press-gang seizure of the returning sailors, and there that Philip received her with her mother the night before her father was taken to York assizes. 'The dark confined house that [is] her home' (327) seems to embody the oppressiveness of her relationship with Philip. The life of comfort and ease which Philip creates for her is an empty, passive existence and she feels entrapped in an enslavement almost as real as her father's imprisonment. In her new role as 'Mrs Hepburn', Sylvia's change of dress embodies her enforced idleness and loss of freedom. Occasionally she escapes from 'the comfortable imprisonment of her 'parlour', and the close streets around the market-place' (318) to go up onto the cliffs and gaze out at the free open sea. Philip's insistence that a nurse should look after her baby deprives Sylvia of the joy of looking after her child, imposing the constraint of a townswoman's respectability. Sylvia's delight is to escape to the freedom of the seashore to enjoy her baby:

The fresh sea-breeze restored something of the colour of former days to her cheeks, the old buoyancy to her spirits; here she might talk her heart-full of loving nonsense to her baby; here it was all her own; no father to share in it, no nursemaid to dispute the wisdom of anything she did with it (327).

Gaskell conveys all the intensity of the young mother's emotions as she escapes from the cage of her 'irrevocable marriage' and finds again her youthful spirit.<sup>17</sup> On the two occasions when Sylvia returns to Haytersbank, she feels strangely disorientated by the changes there: the first time she is struck by the numerous children playing outside and the confusion and untidiness of clothes and playthings strewing the house-place, making it more like the Corneys' kitchen than her mother's 'orderly and quiet

abode'(341) and on the second occasion, when she goes to seek lemon balm for her dying mother, she is even more disconcerted at finding the house shut up and unoccupied, the untended garden given over to weeds and the gaunt cat, mewing with hunger and too wild to let her touch it. The deserted farm seems to echo the desolation in Sylvia's heart, as if the world of her youth is dead and gone forever.

Throughout *Sylvia's Lovers* the divide between country and town has been a fundamental element in the psychological make-up of Sylvia and Philip. Their difference is in part genetic: Sylvia has inherited her father's rebellious spirit, while Philip, as Bell Robson's nephew, is of solid yeoman stock, which transmutes readily into a townsman's respectability. Yet both Sylvia and Philip are even more markedly conditioned by their environment: nature and nurture seem, indeed, to be indissolubly intertwined. Philip is drawn towards Sylvia precisely because her temperament is so different from his; Sylvia, on the other hand, rejects Philip's suit, because she feels an instinctive disdain for the townsman. Sylvia, in accepting to marry Philip, knows that, in endeavouring to be a good wife to Philip, she must change her whole personality from the high-spirited country girl to the respectable wife of the townsman. Even before their marriage, Philip observes a change in Sylvia, as she obeys his wishes with 'gentle indifference' and 'in the spirit of obedience, which, as her mother's daughter, she believed to be her duty towards her affianced husband'(301). Philip longs for 'the old Sylvia back again; captious, capricious, wilful, haughty, merry, charming'(ib.), but, as Gaskell comments ruefully, 'Alas! that Sylvia was gone for ever'(ib.). Sylvia's tempestuous nature occasionally reasserts itself, as when, in refusing to see the dying Simpson, she recognises the fundamental difference in temperament between herself and Philip: 'Thee and me was niver meant



to go together!’ and then, with more irony than she can know, ‘It’s not in me to forgive, – I sometimes think it’s not in me to forget’(303).

In depicting the fluctuations of Sylvia and Philip’s marriage, Gaskell seems to move beyond the immediate circumstances to explore the fundamental nature of marriage and the need for a husband and wife to work at the marital relationship to create a lasting union. Significantly, the birth of the child creates a new bond between Sylvia and Philip, so that Sylvia is gradually learning to love Philip, as well as to like and respect him. As Sylvia and Philip move towards a greater marital accord, the divisive influence of their respective backgrounds seems to recede, but at points of tension and disagreement the old differences of town and country reassert themselves to reinforce their incompatibility. After Sylvia has called out Kinraid’s name in her sleep, Philip, in his jealous anger, rounds on her brutally: ‘Kinraid’s dead, I tell yo’, Sylvie. And what kind of a woman are yo’ to go dreaming of another man i’ this way, and taking on so about him, when yo’re a wedded wife, with a child as yo’ve borne to another man?’(322). Sylvia’s reaction is to retreat into dutiful but unfeeling wifely obedience, while Philip again turns to enhancing his prestige by his regular churchgoing, proud to have his wife accompany him ‘to the pew, newly painted, with his name on the door, where he sate in full sight of the clergyman and congregation’(326). Gaskell satirises the townsman’s quest for respectability in his churchgoing, which she contrasts with the easy attitude of country people like Sylvia’s family who went to church if there were no demands of farm-work to be done. For Sylvia, churchgoing is an irksome duty, a symbol of ‘her life of respectability and prosperity’(*ib.*); for the country girl, as Gaskell suggests, Pope’s ‘crust of bread and liberty’ is infinitely more suited. Gaskell again emphasises the difference in values between the townsman and the

countrywoman and its impact on their relationship. Her sympathies undoubtedly lie with the greater naturalness of simple country people.

In the crisis after Kinraid's re-appearance, Sylvia's youthful spirit reasserts itself as she rounds on Philip in an adamant vow: 'I'll never forgive yon man, nor live with him as his wife again' (348). For the Unitarian Gaskell, Sylvia's repudiation of her husband and the irrevocable nature of her oath are undoubtedly a sin, just as, despite all her sympathy, she is unflinching in her view of Ruth's guilt. With Sylvia, she attenuates her blame, by emphasising Sylvia's youthful desolation in her pathetic plea to Kester: 'I cannot forgive him; he's just spoilt my life, and I'm not one-and-twenty yet' (366). With childish docility, she accepts the arrangements made for her by Jeremiah Foster. 'She was too much a child', explains Gaskell's authorial voice, not wholly convincingly, 'too entirely unaccustomed to any independence of action, to do anything but leave herself in his hands' (378). Gaskell seems consciously to evoke echoes of Sylvia's younger self: as Sylvia persuades Alice Rose to teach her to read so that she may read her Bible, the reader's thoughts are drawn back to the image of the young Sylvia so wilfully declaring herself 'no scholar', as she defies Philip's attempts to teach her to read and write; now, though finding the task no easier, a changed Sylvia perseveres for the sake of her child. If, as Uglow suggests,<sup>18</sup> Philip's journey is to be seen as a 'spiritual allegory', so too Sylvia makes a spiritual journey, becoming aware of the wrongness of the irrevocable nature of her oath and gradually reassessing her husband and finding her feelings for him change into love. Ironically, Philip's first glimpse of Sylvia on his return to the town is of a happy young mother with her child, while he, himself, is a disfigured and destitute outcast in his own town: he knows nothing of the emptiness in Sylvia's life. In some ways, Sylvia is becoming

the respected townswoman Philip would have her be and is seen as such by the townspeople. Prudently, she cautions Widow Dawson against her undesirable lodger, urging her to send him on his way. While the young Sylvia, to Philip's dismay, had spontaneously seized the hand of Newcastle Bess, the townswoman, for her gesture of goodwill, has need of the device of hiding her half-crown in a cake for Bella to give to the 'poor man'; but the young countrywoman's generosity of spirit still lies at the heart of the act of kindness. With Philip fatally wounded in rescuing Bella, Sylvia and he touchingly find reconciliation in their mutual love and in their faith in God: the old differences between town and country have faded away. The final image of Sylvia, etched in the memory of the bathing woman, is of the townswoman, 'a pale, sad woman, allays dressed in black' (454). For Gaskell, the positive legacy remains that of the self-denying Hester Rose who founded the alms-houses for disabled sailors and soldiers, with their dedication 'created in memory of P. H.' (*ib.*).

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell offers her fullest description of farming life in her portrayal of the Robson family and their farm servant, Kester. As in the short stories, the setting of the countryside is an essential element in the lives of the characters. The psychological study of the key figures – Daniel Robson, the sailor turned farmer, his steady wife, Bell, their lively daughter, Sylvia, and the farm-servant, Kester – lies at the core of the novel and is reinforced by certain realist techniques. Gaskell, however, carefully counterbalances her image of country life with the life of the town: more than in any of her other works, the life of country and town are intermeshed, with a constant toing and froing between the two. After Sylvia's marriage to the townsman, Philip Hepburn, the focus shifts to the town, with the country girl's reaction to a new and strangely passive existence and the study of the impact on the

marriage of the characters' differing values of town and country. Gaskell's sympathy appears to lie with the country girl, yet in the conclusion the townsman Philip is redeemed in death, while the countrywoman Sylvia, who has faced courageously the vicissitudes of her young life, is gently eclipsed from the scene, as the sad figure of the widowed townswoman 'allays dressed in black'. In this, Gaskell's 'saddest story', the fundamental tragedy seems that, not that of the townsman, Philip Hepburn, but in the sacrifice of the young countrywoman, Sylvia Robson.

### Notes

- 1 *Sylvia's Lovers*, ed. Shirley Foster, London, Penguin, 1996. All references are to this edition.
- 2 On Gaskell's visit to Whitby and her sources, cf. Foster's Introduction, viii-xi, and 'Appendix 1: Sources', 477-482.  
Cf., also, Frances Twinn's 'Navigational pitfalls and topographical constraints in *Sylvia's Lovers*', in *GSJ*, 15 (2001), 38-52 (38-41).
- 3 In *Tales of the Hall* (1819), included in *George Crabbe: The Complete Poetical works*, ed. N Dalrymple-Champneys and A Pollard, 3 vols, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, vol 2, 341-353.
- 4 From Whitby, Gaskell wrote to George Eliot telling her that she had read again *Scenes from Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, adding 'I must, once more, tell you how earnestly fully, and humbly I admire them. I never read everything so complete, and beautiful in fiction, in my whole life before' (*GL* 592).
- 5 Cf. Foster, in her Introduction (xxviii, n.22), quoting A W Ward's edition, *The Works of Mrs Gaskell*, 8 vols, London, Smith , Elder, 1906, VI, xii.
- 6 Cf. Foster, 'Appendix 1: Sources', 477
- 7 *Ruth*, ed. A Shelston, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, xi
- 8 Also published in pamphlet form, William Gaskell, *Two Lectures on the Lancashire Dialect*, London, Bradbury and Evans, 1854.  
On William Gaskell's lectures, cf., also, Gaskell's letters to William Savage Landor, *GL*, Letters 196 and 197, 291-293
- 9 Cf. Foster, 'Appendix 2: Dialect and Textual Changes', 483-484

It is to be noted, moreover, that Wiltshire, in 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Romanticism' (2002), acknowledges that 'Wordsworth did not share William Gaskell's interest in regional dialects' (59). Like her husband, Gaskell, however, recognised their significance.

- 10 Haytersbank Farm and Moss Brow Farm are generally identified as Straggleton and High Straggleton Farms on the West Cliff at Whitby, though as Foster points out (xi) Gaskell stated in a letter of November 1863 to James Dixon: 'I did not intend Haytersbank for any particular place, or if I had some faint recollection of a farm-house like it, it must have been a place near Sunderland where I once stayed for a couple of nights' (*GL* 718). Given Gaskell's tendency to mask location, this does not preclude the possibility that the identification of the two farms is correct.
- 11 The description of the gnarled apple trees in the Corneys' orchard bears a marked resemblance to Paul Manning's description of the old apple tree and the chaffinch's nest outside his window at Hope Farm in *Cousin Phillis* (*Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, ed. A. Easson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981), 331.
- 12 Frances Twinn, in 'Navigational Pitfalls...', *GSI*, 15 (2001), 46-48.
- 13 In *Ruth*, Gaskell conveys even more forcibly the sense of the seashore impeding Ruth's advance, as she recognises Bellingham in the 'Mr Donne' accompanying Mr Bradshaw: 'it seemed as if weights were attached to her feet – as the sharpest rocks receded – as if time stood still; – it was so long, so terrible, that path across the reeling sand' (269).
- 14 L Henson, 'The 'Condition-of-England' debate and the 'Natural History of Man': an important scientific context for the social-problem fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell', in *GSI*, 16 (2002), 30-47 (45)
- 15 Gaskell's portrayal of Kester is abundantly sympathetic, whereas in *Adam Bede* Eliot, though she may well catch old Kester's frame of mind, seems to mock the countryman's pride in his thatching skills:  

I am obliged to admit that the object of his reverence was his own skill, towards which he performed some rather affecting acts of worship. He always thatched the ricks; ... and when the last touch had been put to the last beehive rick, Kester ... would take a walk to the rickyard in his best clothes on a Sunday morning and stand in the lane at a due distance to contemplate his own thatching... You might have imagined him to be engaged in some pagan act of adoration (*Adam Bede*, ed. V. Cunningham (1996), 517-518).

Even Eliot's tribute to Kester seems vaguely condescending: 'I am not ashamed of commemorating old Kester: you and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men – hands that have mingled with the soil they have tilled so faithfully...' (518).
- 16 In a letter to Mary Howitt of 18<sup>th</sup> August 1838 Gaskell describes the old custom of 'sanding' at weddings, as at her marriage at Knutsford in 1832.

Friends would strew red sand in front of their houses and then with white sand sprinkle a pattern of flowers on the red ground. Kester sings the second verse of the sanding song which Gaskell quotes in her letter (*GL* 29).

17 In Sylvia's feelings for her child, we are reminded of the force of Gaskell's own maternal instincts in her letters and in her Diary, published in *Private Voices* (1996).

18 Uglow (1993), 525

### **The Country in the Writings of Elizabeth Gaskell: an Overview**

Gaskell's love of the countryside, her fascination with country life and customs and her empathy with country people are instinct in all her writing, in her letters, her fictional writing and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Her early aim to give expression to the 'seeing-beauty' in the lives of humble people is evident throughout her work, from her earliest stories to a novel like *Sylvia's Lovers*, written towards the end of her life. Her portrayal of the countryside and ordinary country people in the short stories and *Sylvia's Lovers* has been the main focus of this study, which I aim in this chapter to situate within the broader context of her portrayal of country life in general.

In Gaskell's description of the countryside and country people, Wordsworth was unquestionably her greatest source of inspiration. Like Wordsworth, she had an instinctive sensitivity for natural beauty and a profound respect for the simple way of life of country people. If some of her early short stories seem slightly too 'Romanticised', increasingly within her fictional writing, Gaskell has an eye for the telling details of everyday life and an accuracy in the representation of dialect which surpasses that of Wordsworth and presents greater affinity with that of her contemporary, George Eliot. If Wordsworth seems conscious of a dying breed of countrymen and a passing way of life, Gaskell, while acknowledging the inevitability of change in the rural world, has a more positive attitude and a belief in the survival of country values.

In her portrayal of rural character, Gaskell is influenced by pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories, particularly that of William B Carpenter and, later, by Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, with Roger Hamley as its exponent in *Wives and Daughters*. The farmer Daniel Robson in *Sylvia's Lovers*, like the working-class John Barton in *Mary Barton*, reacts violently to injustice. Some of this same 'primitive' spirit pervades the rough farmers of the Lakeland stories and the rude Pennine breed of the *Life* and, differently, the countrymen stultified by hard labour in *North and South*. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Gaskell, though partly influenced by evolutionary theories, has a fundamental belief in the innate goodness of simple country people.

In 'A Year at Ambleside', published in *Sartain's Union Magazine* in 1850, Harriet Martineau presents an interesting point of comparison with Gaskell's representation of Lakeland life. It is not known whether Gaskell was familiar with this work, though as 'Martha Preston' was published in *Sartain's Union Magazine* in the same year, it may well have been the case. As a social reformer, Martineau had undoubtedly a hidden agenda in her account and she places great emphasis on the insanitary living conditions and the harshness of rural life, particularly the abject poverty in the remote farmsteads, with the inarticulate and uneducated peasantry living in proximity to their animals. Gaskell dwells less on rural deprivation, but prefers to emphasise the influence of the rigours of this rude environment on the character of generations of farmers wedded to their land. Within Gaskell's depiction of rural life, there is, nonetheless, an undercurrent of concern at social injustice, such as the brutality of the treatment of the mentally disturbed in the workhouses and asylums, with Bell Robson's tale of poor mad Nancy Hartley and Susan Dixon's refusal to allow her



brother Willie to be taken off to Lancaster Asylum. With her Unitarian views, Gaskell has, moreover, an implicit concern at the lack of education of country girls. Yet, these social issues are not allowed to dominate in her account of rural life: she appears determined to present a positive image of the country life, whether it be that of the north country dales and fells and Welsh Wales of the short stories or the gentler countryside of Hope Farm in *Cousin Phillis* or *Wives and Daughters*.

In Gaskell's description of the countryside, in her fictional writing as in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the reader has the sense that it is Gaskell's eye which perceives in the vividness of her writing. We feel that places are directly known to her – the site of the well of Pen-Morfa, the view over the grey stone wall out across Morecambe Bay in 'The Sexton's Hero', the bleak moors above Whitby with the half-starved cattle and black-faced sheep in *Sylvia's Lovers*, and the swift-flowing stream and deserted school buildings of Cowan Bridge, which Gaskell had visited and which she describes in the *Life*. Yet, on occasion, our impression of viewed reality may be an illusion: through her artistry and meticulous attention to detail, Gaskell has the ability to create country scenes which have the feel of authenticity, just as she has the capacity to convey a sense of the affinity which exists between country people and the setting which shapes their lives and forms their very being.

The vitality of Gaskell's description of country life stems from the force of her realist techniques. In her creation of character, she uses details of physical appearance and dress, the telling glance or gesture, which are reinforced by the accuracy of the dialectal speech.. Her figures are caught in action, often in the bustling activity of the farm kitchen. Gaskell uses trivial objects of everyday life – Eliot's 'commonplace

things’ – to enhance the impression of lived reality and to give insight into character: Bell Robson taking the ‘red woollen comforter’ and the ‘peppermint cake’ for her husband on his arrest, Kester with his bag of humbugs for little Bella and Willie Dixon offering the distressed Susan his treasured paper windmill. The sheer homeliness of these objects makes a direct appeal to the reader. Through the directness of the gaze, moreover, Gaskell encourages her reader to feel that he or she views the scene objectively, though all the while sympathies are being engaged; this, in turn, creates a sense of complicity between Gaskell and her reader.

Despite the seeming objectivity of her realist techniques, Gaskell’s own sentiments and humanitarian engagement seem to lie not far beneath the surface in her writing. Her viewpoint may find its expression in her gentle irony: Bell Robson’s respect for the ‘superior intellect of the masculine gender’ or Anne Leigh replacing her husband ‘on his throne’ after his deathbed forgiveness of his daughter. Gaskell shows kindly tolerance of country people’s foibles: the statesmen farmers’ tendency to go ‘laking’ or their ‘sober pleasure in amassing money’. Occasionally her social satire has a sharper edge to it, serving a clear authorial purpose, as when Philip Hepburn’s thirst for respectability underlies his ostentatious churchgoing and intensifies the difference in values between Sylvia and himself. Gaskell’s sympathies so clearly rest with the greater naturalness of simple country people.

What difference in perspective is there, then, between Gaskell’s portrayal of the countryside and country people in the short stories and *Sylvia’s Lovers*, which have been the focus of this study, and the more overtly middle-class stance of *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*? In the former works, our impression is of a direct

gaze: country people are there before our eyes in all their lived reality and from this stems the essential vitality of Gaskell's portrayal. In *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, however, the perspective is different: the countryside and country people are viewed largely through the eyes of the two middle-class women characters, Margaret Hale and Molly Gibson. As readers, our attention focuses not merely on the indirectly viewed countryside, but, importantly, on its impact on Margaret and Molly, not least because of their greater capacity for introspection. As Margaret gazes at the 'dark-gray lines of the church tower, square and straight', there is in the scene for her 'no sign of God'<sup>1</sup> and, at that moment, she seems nearer than her father to loss of faith. On Margaret's return to Helstone, we see through her eyes the poignancy of change, the old cottages pulled down, the parsonage 'improved' by the new vicar and his brash wife, and we share Margaret's horror at the brutal story of the roasted cat and the superstitious countrywoman's complacent acceptance of the cruelty. In these novels, Gaskell's presence is less immediate, as if she eclipses herself behind her characters, and our focus as readers is centred on the infinite subtlety of the psychological study. In the latter part of *Sylvia's Lovers*, Hester Rose and Sylvia seem poised between two worlds. As Josie Billington has shown in her perceptive study, *Faithful Realism Elizabeth Gaskell and Leo Tolstoy: A Comparative Study*,<sup>2</sup> Hester and Sylvia cannot really comprehend one another: the townswoman Hester has a greater capacity for reflection and introspection, whereas Sylvia, who is less intelligent, reacts instinctively. Gaskell seems to imply a fundamental difference in the psychological make-up of the townswoman and the countrywoman, just as there is, even more significantly, between Sylvia and the townsman, Philip Hepburn.

In her writings, Gaskell describes a broad spectrum of country life, which is rooted in her own love of the countryside and her deep empathy with country people. In the short stories and *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell presents a portrayal of country life which is of extraordinary veracity: we are struck by the richness of her picture, her insight into character and the subtlety of her techniques. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, moreover, she contrasts forcefully the differing life-styles, characteristics and attitudes of townspeople and country people. In *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, to which I have made brief reference, there is a difference in perspective, in that the country is viewed largely through the eyes of middle-class women characters, with a greater emphasis on introspection. Through the breadth of her picture, the acuity of her observation and her engagement, Gaskell's depiction of the countryside and country people is unique in nineteenth century English literature.

### Notes

- 1 E C Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. P Ingham, London, Penguin, 1995, 43
- 2 J. Billington, *Faithful Realism Elizabeth Gaskell and Leo Tolstoy: A Comparative Study*, London, Associated University Presses, 2002, 97-102

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